THE

LONDON READER

of Literature, Science, Art, and General Information.

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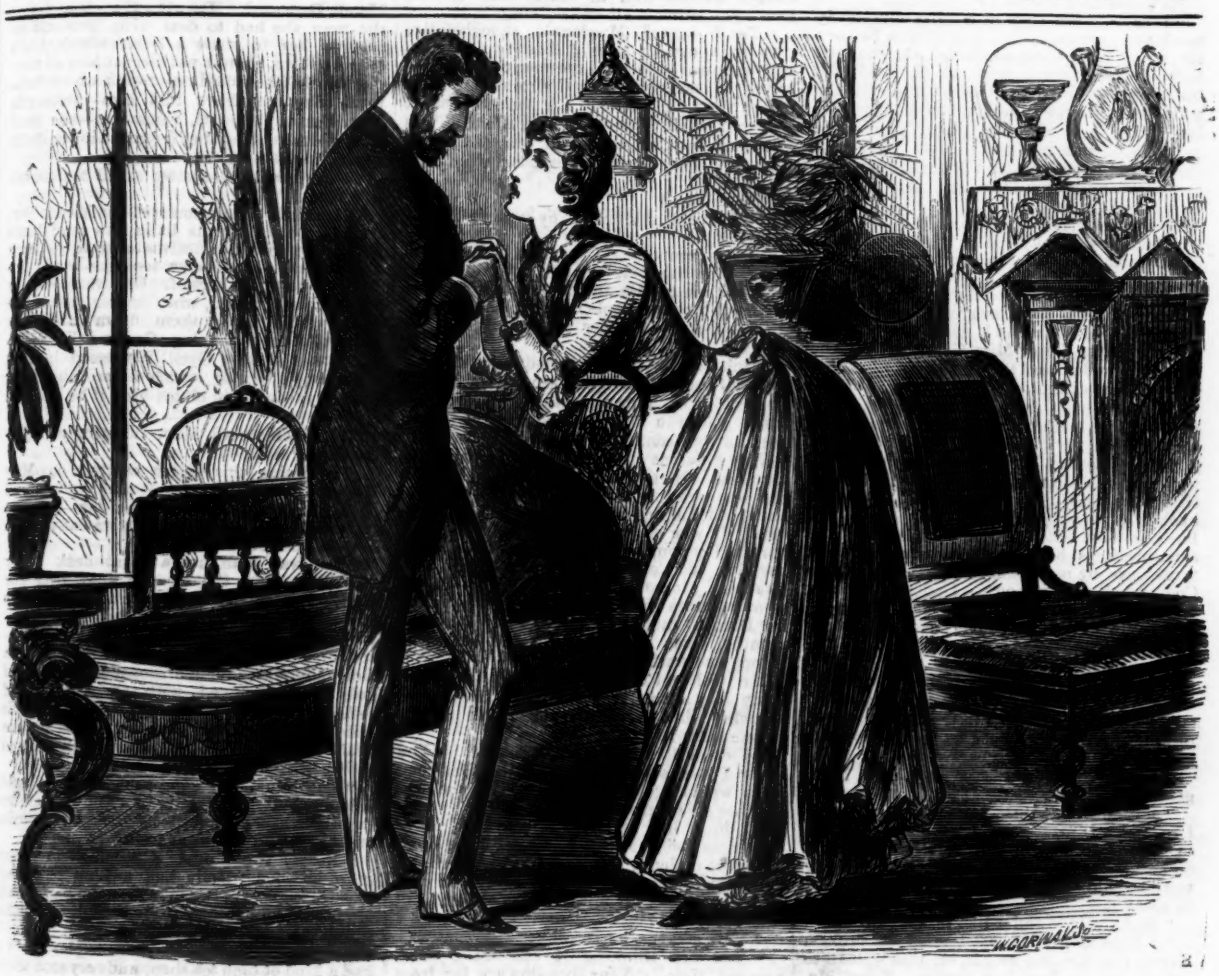
No. 1347.—VOL. LII. FOR THE WEEK ENDING FEBRUARY 23, 1889. [PRICE ONE PENNY.



[A STRANGE WOOING!]

EILEEN'S ROMANCE.

CHAPTER XII.

"I DARE not! Oh! I dare not! She would be so angry!"

These were the words which came from poor Dorothy's trembling lips in reply to the doctor's appeal to her to confide in her cousin. May shrank back with a pained look on her kind face as she answered,—

"I am never angry with you, Dolly."

"She does not mean *you*," whispered Dr. Macdonald. Then going back to his chair by Dorothy's sofa, he asked her, "If you are in trouble why not confide in someone? Surely your grief would be easier to bear?"

Dorothy only shook her head.

"She would not let me!"

"Miss Courtenay," said Dr. Macdonald, gently, "don't you know you are safe in your uncle's house? No one can molest you here without Lord Vivian's knowledge. You have nothing to do but to keep up your spirits and get well. Your cousin and her nurse will see that no one comes near you against your wishes."

Dorothy turned her face away with a sigh.

"Don't you trust them?" asked the doctor.

"Perfectly; but they can't help it. No locks or bars can keep me free. The moment I am alone she comes!"

"Then, my poor child, the remedy is simple: you must never be left alone."

"But that would make her angry. And, oh! you don't understand! I dare not anger her. I am in her power!"

A less experienced man might have pressed more questions, but Dr. Macdonald did not ask a single other one; he only took the little wasted hand in his and bade the girl good-bye as kindly as though she had been a little child he had known for years.

May Delaval followed him from the room. She knew her mother would expect to see him before he left the house, but she wanted a few words with him first. The solemnity of his manner almost frightened her as he turned into her boudoir.

"Lady May, do you feel brave enough to fight that poor child's battle? I warn you it is no easy one."

"I will do what heart and strength can!" answered May. "I am very fond of Dorothy, and I can't bear to see her in this state!"

"Mr. Goldsmith told me your theory on the subject."

"I expected you to laugh at it."

"My dear young lady, I have seen too many strange things to laugh at any honestly-believed theory. In the present case I think with you your cousin's illness is of the mind, not the body. I believe that some person has obtained a remarkable influence over her, and is now using it for a cruel purpose."

"And that is mesmerism?"

"Not precisely. Mesmerism has done much useful work, and worked many cures; but it has one fearful risk. In the hands of an unscrupulous person it can be put to a perverted use. I believe, Lady May, that this would explain your cousin's state. The will is not a strong one, that once conquered by the experimenter it would be easy enough to throw her into a state of hypnotism."

May shook her head.

"I never heard of such a thing."

"It means paralysis of the will. In such cases the poor victim has literally no will at all, but is a helpless tool in the hands of superior force. Before now, Lady May, men have committed murders, and even taken their own life while in this fearful condition."

May shuddered.

"You don't mean that——"

He understood the broken sentence.

"I don't mean that poor Miss Courtenay has killed anyone, or done any similar heinous sin, but it looks to me as though the poor girl had been led to some rash act of which she bitterly repents. When in her natural state the influence is abhorrent to her, but she is powerless to shake it off. She probably knows it would be an immense relief to tell you everything, and yet she has been brought into such complete subjection to a stronger will she dares not speak."

May's eyes gleamed with anger.

"And you think this is *right?* You, a man, permit such cruel persecution to go unpunished?"

"Softly, softly," pleaded the doctor. "Firstly, I do not think it right, but very, very wrong; secondly, I do not mean it to go unpunished; but remember I saw Miss Courtenay for the first time to-day, and the case is one of almost unparalleled difficulty."

"Forgive me," said May penitently, "but it makes me frantic when I see Dorothy like this."

"The difficulty is to break the spell. A person once thrown into the state of hypnotism is peculiarly liable to it again. I cannot explain it to you, Lady May, but if the will has once been subdued into complete submission, meetings between the victim and the tyrant are by no means necessary. If Miss Courtenay's enemy (you see I adopt your own term) possesses the powers I credit her with, she could influence your cousin from any distance."

"It sounds like witchcraft."

"Such cases are rare in the extreme. I would never, not even to save life, allow anyone I cared for to be subjected to such an influence, since the spell cannot be broken against the wish of the operator."

"Are you sure of that?" asked May, gravely.

"Not quite. But think for yourself. Dread of this mysterious influence is apparent in your cousin's every word, and yet she dares do nothing to free herself. She knows a word to you would help her, but she is too frightened to speak it."

"And she is to suffer like this for life?"

"I hope not. The spell must be broken. Surely pressure can be put on this woman to induce her to free her victim. From Mr. Goldsmith I gathered you knew who it was."

"I believe I do."

"And you will tell me? Of course, your confidence is sacred."

May hesitated.

"My mother would never forgive me if she knew I brought such a charge. She and papa are both infatuated with the young lady. She comes of a family equal to our own, and is of great beauty."

"Is it possible you mean Mrs. Westwood's niece and companion, Miss Desmond?"

"Yes, it is possible. You know her?"

"I have met her."

"And you think she possesses this gift?"

"As she and her aunt have made a handsome income between them for years by mesmeric cures, I *know* she has the power. Mrs. Westwood pursues her profession secretly, and under an assumed name. I don't believe one of the people who associate with her at Scarborough or the Isle of Wight have an idea how she spends her time in London. I fancy her own son does not suspect the truth."

"But you know it."

"I know the ladies have lived at Brompton for some years during the season, and have won for themselves considerable renown by their reputed cures. I might never have guessed their identity but for being called in to attend the elder during a sharp illness. Mrs. Westwood was induced to confide in me. Her niece had left her and gone abroad; she was getting old, and I think the life she led undermined her health."

"Oh, Dr. Macdonald, it all seems so clear! It is Cyril Westwood who loved Dorothy and has been made to forsake her, and his mother always wanted him to marry his cousin. Don't you think it all looks plain?"

"Yes," agreed Macdonald thoughtfully, "up to a certain point; these two women, both endowed with fatal mesmeric powers, resolved to separate Miss Courtenay and her lover; thus far I follow you perfectly, but I gather that Mr. Westwood is in Africa. The cruel scheme has succeeded perfectly; then why need they torture the poor child further?"

May shivered.

"What did she mean by saying *I* was safe?"

"There are certain persons who, from some constitutional peculiarity, resist all efforts to mesmerise them; probably you are of the number. People in perfect health and with no nervous fancies are usually hard to affect."

"But Dorothy seemed perfectly well."

"Still she is of a highly sensitive organisation, which explains a great deal, Lady May. I am glad you have trusted me; you shall not find your confidence bestowed in vain."

Very different was his interview with the Countess. He told Lady Vivian Miss Courtenay was certainly in delicate health, but care and good nursing would, he hoped, do wonders. It was an excellent thought to bring her to London, as change was often most useful in such cases; and Lady Vivian, who was the kindest and most hospitable of women, wrote off to her sister-in-law declaring Dorothy must stay with her at least three months, when she hoped to send her home strong and well.

Mr. Goldsmith managed a *tête-à-tête* with Lady May again that very day. He looked troubled when he heard the result of the physician's visit.

"I don't like it," he said, simply. "You know I saw a good deal of Miss Desmond some weeks ago, and I am afraid you will find her a dangerous foe."

"I don't like it either," confessed May; "mamma being so fond of her makes it all the more difficult. Isn't it strange, Mr. Goldsmith, that Lucy, her brother Basil and myself should all have felt an instinctive fear of Miss Desmond?"

"Very strange."

"You are thinking of something else," accused May. "Your thoughts are far from Dolly!"

"I was thinking of Cyril Westwood."

"Oh," and May gave a little disdainful toss of her head; "you need not think of him, if he has so little faith in Dolly as to believe the first person who speaks against her, he deserves to lose her."

"You don't know what he has been told?"

"People should never believe what they hear."

Adam lowered his voice.

"Lady May, bear with me just a minute. You judge Westwood harshly. He may have been deceived as well as poor Miss Courtenay. You say she is in mortal terror; that something she has done—or believes she has done—haunts her. Don't you think there may be something in this? Could she not, while acting under this hateful influence, have written to Mr. Westwood breaking off their engagement?"

"It is a wonderful theory!" said May, frankly, "and would explain everything; but unfortunately it won't do. You see, they were *not* engaged."

"You need only vary the theory—the main belief is the same. I know Westwood a little. We are not intimate, but I have seen enough of him to pledge my word he *could* not play the part you ascribe to him. *He* would never have left Miss Courtenay after his open allusion to her without some reason. Until to-day I despaired of finding a motive; now I can see it clearly. While under his cousin's influence the poor girl was induced to write to him a letter that parted them for ever."

"But what could it be about?"

"A hundred things. Remember, the real author of it would be not Miss Courtenay, but Maude Desmond. Knowing the character of the man she had to deal with, it would be easy to her to write a letter which, while parting them, should yet disgust him so completely, that he would never seek an explanation. She may have told him—writing in Miss Dorothy's name, remember—she cared for someone else, and so begged him to desist from a useless suit."

"But to write that letter would be the work of a fiend!"

"Granted. But women of the Maude Desmond type do become little less than fiends when they give themselves over to jealousy and malice! Remember, too, she would not write these words herself. She would dictate them to her victim, who, in her trance-like state, would write them down without a thought of their meaning. Granted that such a letter was sent to Cyril Westwood in Miss Courtenay's writing, which he probably knew perfectly, could you blame him if he believed it?"

"No," whispered May, falteringly; "perhaps not."

"Supposing this letter written on Miss Ernescliff's wedding-day—cast your mind back to the after part of the day—can you remember if Miss Courtenay was at all with Maude Desmond?"

"She was with her a great deal. Dolly offered to show the strange guest over the Hall. I went with them part of the way, but I never feel easy in Maude Desmond's company, and so I came back to the drawing-room. I was a little vexed, I recollect, at Dolly's fondness for a stranger I disliked. If only I had stayed with them instead of selfishly seeking my own pleasure, all this misery might never have happened, for the next day would have seen Dolly safely engaged to Mr. Westwood."

"You must not reproach yourself," said Adam, gently; "but do try and remember exactly what happened. Were your cousin and her friend absent any time?"

"Nearly two hours. I recollect my aunt grew anxious. Dolly had a kind of dazed look in her eyes when she came back, and Maude explained it by saying the bright light of the gas seemed blinding after the gloom of the empty rooms they had been exploring. We had a kind of high tea then, and very soon after Dorothy went to bed."

"Depend upon it, the spell was worked then. Whatever parted your cousin and Westwood was contrived in that exploration of the Hall."

"And then?"

"The rest seems to me easy." Hurt and sad from Mr. Westwood's desertion, Miss Courtenay would naturally avoid her mother and those who had expected to see her his *fiancée*. Miss Desmond was his cousin, and no doubt that fact attracted Miss Dorothy to her. The influence over her became strengthened, and when she thought she had riveted her chains strongly enough, with the cruelty of a harpy, Miss Desmond turned on her victim, and told her how she had parted her from her lover."

"But that would surely alleviate Dorothy?"

"The chains were too secure by this time for the victim to escape. I can't tell—I can form no idea of what was in the letter which parted the lovers; but I am quite sure some letter was written—written, too, with Miss Courtenay's own pen in her own hand. I think there must have been something in that missive she blushes to recollect—the thought of which tortures her. Probably, poor child, she does not understand the influence brought

to bear on her. *She wrote it.* This much she knows, and the knowledge makes her ashamed; but how she came to write it she has no idea. She is hemmed in on all sides. If she threatens an appeal she is tannted by the threat that Miss Desmond will expose the letter. To Cyril Westwood she cannot speak. It would, she feels, be like asking him to forgive her. All other confidantes are forbidden to her by her persecutor's threat of revealing what she wrote to her lover on that fatal afternoon."

May looked up at him with wondering eyes.

"How can you think of it? I feel you have explained all that puzzled me, but how did you do it?"

"You admit I may be right?"

"I *feel* you are. But, Mr. Goldsmith," she hesitated, "your discovery is wonderful, but it does not help us to bring back Dorothy's peace of mind. Your theory, marvellous as it is, only makes the case seem quite hopeless!"

"Nothing is hopeless, save death."

"But Dorothy can *do* nothing."

"Miss Courtenay can do nothing. Even were she well and free from this awful terror, which saps her strength, she could not stir in this herself."

"And Basil *will* not. I know he longs to call Mr. Westwood out, but he *can't*, because his father is Cyril's heir-at-law."

"Besides, duels are out of fashion. Lady May, I see no one who can act in this matter but myself. Will you trust your cousin's interests in my keeping?"

"I would trust you with anything in the world!" said May, warmly. "But I do not see how even you can undo this cruel knot."

"You cannot go to Africa, Lady May. If your cousin Basil went, or even Sir Bryan, the world at large would declare it was in pursuit of Mr. Westwood. Besides, thinking himself—as he probably does—deeply injured, he would be sure to avoid anyone of the name of Courtenay. Now, if *I* chance to be travelling in Algiers and come across him, what is there to make him think our meeting anything but an accident. I have met him just often enough to be on friendly terms, but I know nothing of his private life. I have the reputation of being a born rover, so it cannot strike him as strange that I have elected to exchange English fogs for a winter in the sunny south."

"And when you have found him?"

"That depends on the news I have from you. If Miss Courtenay is better, I should pave my way gradually, and try to become really intimate with him before I hinted that she had had a strange and mysterious illness which none of us could explain; but if she were still in this state, I should go to him boldly and tell him that the niece of those I counted my dearest friends was lying on a bed of sickness from which I believed it was in his power to raise her. I should tell him all I have said to you, and if he is the man I think, he would return with me at once."

"And that would save her?"

"I think so. Just now, abject terror of Maude Desmond seems the strongest feeling of her nature, but I believe myself that would give place to a passion yet more potent—love."

"And I always fancied you did not believe in love?"

"You wronged me!"

"I'm sure mother has tried to convert you times out of mind."

"Lady Vivian has tried to convert me into a married man times out of mind; but she never sought to make me into a lover. There was no need. Perhaps I feel for Cyril Westwood so keenly, because I know so well what love means?"

May Delaval well nigh forgot Dorothy's affairs in her intense interest at this last speech.

"Did she die?" asked the girl, gently. "I am quite sure you would never have cared for anyone unworthy!"

"She did not die; and you are right, she is not unworthy," replied Goldsmith, earnestly.

"Did she marry anyone else?"

"No."

"Then there is hope yet. She may care for you?"

"I shall never ask her!"

May looked bewildered.

"You must be mad. If you love any one you are bound to tell her so. You may be spoiling her life as well as your own!"

"I think not!"

"Is she in England?"

"Yes!"

"And do I know her?"

"Yes!"

"Well!" and May spoke with unusual bitterness. "You have kept your secret to some purpose. I have never once seen you with anyone I ever fancied you cared for."

"Perhaps not!"

"And it is cruel of you not to speak to her."

"Can't you understand?" he said, gently. "I dare not speak to her. May, my darling, I never meant my secret to pass my lips. I know you are as far above me as the stars in Heaven; but, all the same, I have been mad enough to love you. Had you not been an Earl's daughter, the last representative of a noble name, I should have told you long ago that in all the world yours was the only face for me."

May looked into his face with a strange, sweet smile. It was more reproachful than surprised.

"I can't help my father being an Earl," she said, simply, "and it is not exactly my doing that I am an only child. Don't you think you have treated me a little hardly?"

"I think you are an angel," said poor Adam, sadly, "and it was mad presumption of me to tell you of my love; but you drew my secret from me before I knew it." Then, after a pause, "and after all my love cannot harm you. There is no need to tell me it is hopeless. I know that too well myself. In the years to come when you are a Duchess it won't hurt you that far away an honest heart beats for you!"

"I shall never be a Duchess!" said May, quickly, "you may be quite sure of that. What I want father to do is to adopt Basil Courtenay. There are plenty of younger sons to uphold Uncle Bryan's title and dignity. Basil always took after our family, and he would make a famous master for the Court. Perhaps in time to come my father might obtain that the peerage should descend to him. As for me, I have my godfather's property, which is rather more than I can spend."

"Why should you wish to disinherit yourself?"

"I don't. I should still be a kind of heiress. Father longs to know who is to come after him at the Court. Now, I have no idea of marrying while Basil is engaged to a charming girl, so that if father would only see things as I do, he might gratify his own wishes and make two deserving young people superlatively happy at the same time."

"And you?"

"How you harp about me!" said May, a little pettishly. "Well, I suppose I shall settle down into a tolerably contented old maid since no one I care for will ever ask me to marry him."

"May!"

"I think," returned May, with flashing eyes, "before deciding I was to be a Duchess you might have ascertained my own views."

"You know I worship you!"

"I never dreamed of it till to-day, and I have serious doubts of the fact even now!"

"You might take my word, I think!"

"But your actions are so opposed to it. If you care about me, why do you take such pains to convince me that under no possible circumstances would you propose to me!"

His face blanched. For a moment May regretted her question as she saw the look of anguish which overspread his features.

"Forgive me!" she began; but he interrupted her, and went on.

"I will tell you. The reason which forbids my asking Lord Vivian for his child is no sin of mine—no sin of the father who worshipped me, or the fair young mother I never knew; but yet the fact remains in cruel force. I, Adam Goldsmith, the so-called prosperous banker, am in the eyes of the law 'nobody's child.'"

May Delaval's hot tears gathered in her eyes. Involuntarily she stretched out her hand and put it into his.

"Why should you mind?"

"Listen. I would rather you knew all. When my father was dying, he told me the secret he had guarded so jealously. He was a self-made man, and had risen from the ranks. In youth he married a woman of his own class. Their union was one long misery, and at last he was glad to give her the lion's share of what money he had, and pay her passage to America on condition of being left in peace. The ship she was to sail by, in which her berth was taken, went down with all hands. Her name appeared in the list of passengers of the lost ship. What moralist, however stern, could blame my father in that, seeing this, he believed her dead?

"The years went on. He grew rich and prosperous. He went into the world and was received by its noblest citizens. At last, in middle age, he married.

"You have heard the Countess speak of my resemblance to an elder sister of hers who died when she was a mere child. It is not surprising I should be like Lady Helen Percy, for she was my mother.

"The marriage was four years old, and it was more than twelve since the *Duke of Wellington* had been wrecked when the blow fell."

"Don't say any more," pleaded May. "I understand; she had not sailed in that ship—she reappeared?"

He bowed his head.

"I don't think she was hard. I know she never threatened exposure. She went quietly back across the Atlantic; but her absence could not restore the happiness she had wrecked.

"My little sister was born and in her grave. For weeks my mother's life hung in the balance, then as she grew better they mapped out their future. I was to be sent to my grandparents (you must remember them, Lady May, since they bore the same relationship to you), while my father took my mother abroad. He was to return alone, and as a widower, while she lived in retirement. It was cruelly hard on both, but less painful than publishing their miserable story."

"I remember," said May. "I have often heard mother speak of Aunt Helen's death, and how cruel they felt it that Mr. Stone separated himself and his little boy from them so completely, but I always thought they died."

"That report was circulated. My father wished to break off all connection with the Reny family; but he had a stronger reason. My mother was quite young—a mere girl. In the eyes of the law she was free to marry whom she could, if he could only make her believe him dead.

"There was little doubt, with her beauty, she would find someone to cherish her. As a fact, his ruse succeeded. He heard of her marriage to an officer, who had known and loved her in girlhood. She went to India and died there.

"She had a strange history, parents living—brother and sister—and yet forced to be as dead to them.

"My father only told me the truth when he was dying. In Heaven's sight, he said, no blame attached to my mother or himself; but the fact remains."

"What does it matter?" asked May. "It must have been an awful trial to them, but you are known and respected as Adam Goldsmith. No human creature would even connect you with the son of Mr. Stone and my poor Aunt Helen; besides, even if they did

what harm could it do you, since the flaw in their marriage was never known?"

"It was known to *one* person," said Goldsmith, slowly, "my father's first wife!"

"And is she living?"

"Yes, but I have no fear of her betraying me. She is now a very aged woman, and quite harmless.

"I have received a letter from her not long since (not stating her identity, but of that I have no doubt), asking me to act as executor to her will.

"No, I see no fear of the sword falling; but you must remember nothing can undo the truth. I have no name, and how can I seek to marry the Earl of Vivian's heiress!"

"If you loved me you would not think so much of trifles."

"Trifles!" echoed the banker, bitterly. "Don't you know what the world would call my conduct if I married you, and my miserable story came to light? As to my love, you would not doubt it if you knew what it has cost me to be near you all these years, and yet keep silent."

"And I thought once you were going to marry Maude Desmond; mother quite believed it."

"I never cared for her!" said Goldsmith, slowly, "but I was very near proposing to her. It seemed to me if once my love for you were a sin it would be easier to conquer it. Though my miserable position barred my marrying you, it need not be an obstacle, I thought, in the case of such a wife as Miss Desmond."

May opened her eyes.

"You credited me, then, with being able to appreciate you for what you are, though it seems you judge me incapable of valuing anything but a title?"

"You misunderstand me; I am a rich man. It seemed to me my wealth might induce a portionless bride to risk the storm which, after all, might never break."

May looked at him with a strange soft light shining in her sweet, brown eyes.

"Well, you know now that if I have any power with my father—and people tell me I have a great deal—I shall not be his heiress. I hope Basil will be master of Vivian Court, and bring his young wife there. And I—I shall be a lonely old maid!"

"Child—child! Is it possible that you can?"

"The obstacles are impassable," said May, gravely. "I always respected you more than any man I knew. When my mother was bent on match-making for you, I always felt a kind of dim fear if she succeeded I should lose a friend whose place no one else can fill, but I never guessed until to-night that you cared for me. I mean that you fancied you cared."

"May, is that fair?"

She smiled.

"Is it fair to me to assume I care for nothing but rank?"

"May, do not tempt me; tell me just this one thing, my darling—if I went to your father with my miserable story, and he did not forbid me to hope, what would your answer be?"

May looked at him demurely.

"That would be going quite the wrong way to work. Tell my mother you are her sister Helen's son, tell her of the cruel mistake which spoilt two lives, and ask her if it need blight a third. She will say that no one in the world could be so welcome to her child as you."

"And?"

"But you are not to speak yet," said May, with a pretty air of imperiousness. "Because we two are going to be happy together some day, we must not forget poor little Dolly."

Miss Courtenay had gone utterly out of Adam's head, and he confessed as much.

"*We* can trust each other," said Lady May, simply; "you and I can never be parted save by death. Don't you think before we enjoy our own happiness we ought to try and help Dorothy and Mr. Westwood. It was a noble plan of yours to go to Algiers and fall in with him as though by accident. You won't give up the idea, will you, just because I am not the mercenary creature you fancied me?"

"I will go wherever you send me, dear one, if you can promise your bright youth to a sober, middle-aged man like me. It is but a little thing to undertake, the quest you are set on."

"Spoken like a very knight of olden times," said the girl, gently; "I should never have thought of seeking out Mr. Westwood had you not suggested it, but now it seems to me the one plan."

"I believe it is," confessed Adam, gravely. "He is so true and loyal-hearted he *could* not have treated your cousin so cruelly without believing he had good cause; besides, my darling, if this terrible state continues, we cannot hope for Miss Courtenay's speedy recovery."

May shivered.

"Do you mean she will die?"

"I hope not, I trust not; but it is all so strange, so mysterious. I believe when a person has once been the victim of hypnotism only three things can rescue them. The will of the operator which, of course, can restore them at once to their natural powers, or the employment of another influence stronger even than that which has been exercised so fatally. Now, we neither of us believe, if Miss Desmond has this power over your cousin, she would willingly relinquish it. It remains, therefore, to try whether love cannot conquer fear, whether the sight of Cyril Westwood once more her trusting friend, would not save Miss Courtenay from the awful terror under which she lies."

"You said *three* things," observed May, feverishly. "And you have only named two. What is the other?"

"I would rather not tell you."

"But I would rather know."

"I meant death," he replied, reluctantly. "If Miss Desmond died, her power over your cousin must cease."

"You were not thinking of *her* death," insisted May. "You had poor Dorothy in your mind."

"May," he suggested, quietly, "I honestly believe nothing ails your cousin that Cyril Westwood's presence and tenderness could not remove; but if she is allowed to go on in this state, fretting herself into a fever by day, wracked by fear at night, how can her fragile frame stand such protracted misery?"

"You are right." May looked into her lover's face as though to her, at least, he always must be right, and then added, cheerfully, "When can you go to Algiers?"

It was a singular request to make of a man who had but just confessed his love for her. Strange that her first desire should be to send him away to another continent; but Adam Goldsmith understood May's inmost thoughts, and was well content to do her bidding in this and in all her desires.

"I can start on Saturday; but, May, shall I speak to Lord Vivian first?"

"No. We can trust each other, and Dolly cannot be saved too soon. Please go on Saturday."

"I will do so, and you shall know as soon as I am on Westwood's track; but then you must send me instructions."

"You will manage without any."

"No. If Miss Courtenay is better, there will be no occasion for undue haste. I can wait until my intimacy with Westwood has ripened so far that interference with his private affairs would not seem quite such a liberty; but if her strength is failing, if you are more anxious about her than you are now, I must go to the point at once, and say, simply, 'Dorothy Courtenay is dying, as her cousin believes, from your estrangement. Will you go to see her before the end?'"

May looked at him trustfully.

"And you would even say that?"

"Surely; but only if there were real need. If that poor child were in danger of her life, there would be no reason to stand on ceremony. One would do anything to ease her last hours."

"I see. I will write constantly."

"If she grows suddenly worse telegraph," was the unexpected reply. "I shall send you my address at once."

"It is good of you to go; but——"

"You will miss me just a little?"

"I shall miss you terribly! But that is not what I meant. You are the only creature who shares my fears about Dorothy. I dare not tell my mother of them. I shall have no one to advise with when you are gone; all will rest on me."

"You can trust Macdonald," said Adam, gravely; "he is true as steel, and for some reason I cannot fathom, has a great dread of mesmerism. I should say, be guided by him in all things."

"And if there is a talk of Miss Desmond coming here?"

"Do not wait for there to be a talk of it. Persuade the Countess to let you take Miss Courtenay to the Court at once. Maude Desmond has already been many weeks from home; she might consider Park-lane a kind of half-way house between Blankshire and York; but depend upon it, if she returned to her own county she *must* go straight to her father's. It sounds a paradox, but you are far safer from her there than here."

"And do you think you shall be gone long?"

Adam shook his head.

"I can form no idea. It will be easy enough to find Mr. Westwood; but that done, my mission is a delicate one. Unless I receive bad accounts of Miss Courtenay's health it would be wise to wait some weeks before I even hint at the subject to her quondam lover."

Lady Vivian was surprised at her favourite's abrupt departure for Algiers; and yet more so when he begged that her daughter would send him news of the family's movements. But she never dreamed the two rebels, both of whom defied all her match-making efforts on their behalf, could possibly be in love.

She gave a smiling assent to Adam's request, telling him she was sending the girls down to Yorkshire early the following week.

"Dr. Macdonald thinks the country best for Dorothy, or I should have fancied Yorkshire too cold for her. She is a dear little thing; I wish she would grow stronger, and get a little colour in her cheeks."

The old nurse and Lady May could have explained Dolly's weak, languid movements, her thin, pale cheeks; for the scenes of that first night in Park-lane had been repeated more than once.

May, who watched her cousin closely, felt certain she grew weaker. No one but those who loved her approached her, and yet she seemed a prey to nervous terror. Often and often the soft, grey eyes would be fixed on space, as though they saw there some vision hid from other eyes. For the rest she was a very obedient patient, ate the delicacies brought her by nurse, took all the physic prescribed by the doctor, sat up when they told her, went out for a drive when so advised. But with it all she did not gain ground, and when, a week after May had brought her away from the Hall, the cousins went down to Vivian Court, the difference even in those seven days was terribly apparent!

"I will run down in a few days," said Dr. Macdonald, as he paid his farewell visit, and followed Lady May into her boudoir, for he usually gave his directions to her, not to the Countess.

"I confess I am very anxious about Miss Courtenay. Is there no one else you would like to consult—no friend, I mean, to whom you could tell your impressions."

May shook her head.

"My uncle and aunt are infatuated with Miss Desmond."

"But perhaps Miss Courtenay has brothers?"

"Only one likely to be of use, and it would be cruel to tell him our fears, since he is passionately attached to Miss Desmond's younger sister."

"But it does not follow that the second daughter has this wonderful gift. Indeed, I believe I have heard the young ladies had different mothers."

May looked surprised.

"I never dreamed anyone would fancy *that*. The fact is, my cousin's *fiancée*, Eileen Desmond, is not at all in favour with her beautiful sister. Even now Basil is uneasy at the idea of leaving her in Maude's power. Just think what he would feel if we even hinted at our fears."

But within a week of their journey to Vivian Court it occurred to Lady May she need not have been so considerate of Basil's feelings.

She had called once on Eileen and found her out; she had written to her twice and had no reply; when one morning two pieces of news greeted her which well-nigh took away her breath. The one was conveyed in a letter from Lady Constance, calling for congratulations on her eldest son's engagement to that sweet girl Laura Peyton! The other came in homelier fashion from her own maid, who, as she was brushing her mistress's hair, ventured to ask if she knew that Lord Desmond's youngest daughter was dying.

(To be continued.)

A DESPERATE DEED.

—:o:—

CHAPTER LVIII.

And when the servant responded, Lord Silverdale commended the visitor from Rothlyn to Mrs. Brown's care, and, "Mr. Telegrapher," as Lionel had called him, was escorted away.

"D-dawn, I de-clare," cried Bariston.

He was an undersized, wiry, little old man, with a skin like crumpled parchment, a pair of beady, black eyes, a mouthful of brilliant, bought teeth, and the tenderly-nurtured conviction that he was an unappreciated poet.

Sure enough, between the half-drawn hangings a thin spear of light was forcing its way.

Lionel stretched himself sleepily.

"I believe I'll go to the library and lie down for an hour."

And he lounged away.

Soon the Earl followed him.

"Nice boy, Carzon," commented Mr. O'Donnell. "He seemed a good deal cut up to-night."

Captain Richardson nodded curtly.

"No wonder. He and Damyn had been at daggers drawn. To have their enmity so tragically and suddenly ended was rather—well, rather creepy."

"I didn't know they were b bad friends," put in Bariston. "What was the row?"

Captain Richardson laughed and stroked his blonde moustache.

"What always *is* the row?" he counter-questioned. "A bit of rivalry, I fancy. Our host has a fair daughter. The running of Damyn and Carzon seemed about neck and neck."

"Ah!" exclaimed Bariston, comprehensively. "And they q-quarrelled about her?"

"Well, rather. Lady Iva——"

Mr. O'Donnell rose.

"I don's think it is the very best of taste to discuss her affairs so freely," he said, his fine old face full of indignation.

"Oh, confound it!" expostulated the valiant captain, with a laugh, "What old-fogey notions you have, O Donnell!"

"Perhaps so," assented O'Donnell.

He put his hands behind him and walked out of the room.

The Earl had gone upstairs, looked in on his sleeping wife and come down again, when he heard a fumbling at the knocker.

He strode to the door, opened it.

An uncouth lad in tan coloured corduroy clothes, an enveloping muffler, top-boots and battered felt hat, stood just without.

"I want to see the Earl."

"Well, I am he. What is it?"

The boy glanced up, made a respectful grab at his hat brim, ducked his lordship a bow.

"I *found* somethin'."

"Where?"

"Where the genelman was killed."

He glanced furtively around. One hand was shoved deep in his pocket. He seemed afraid someone would appear and wrest forcibly his treasure from him.

The Earl was generous—thought nothing of giving a chap a crown.

If he could only see him alone—give him his prize unknown to the policeman, who could insist on his surrendering it, he supposed—might not his lordship hand him a good sum for his trouble—maybe half a sovereign?

And here the Earl himself had opened the door. Of such possible good luck as this he had never dreamed.

Lord Silverdale held the door ajar.

"Come in, my boy!"

A clue—perhaps an important one!

With his round eyes glaring in fear and fascination at the impromptu bier in the middle of the great hall, the fellow skulked along behind the Earl's broad back.

They reached the library, went in.

His lordship closed the door. On the hearth two high pedestal lamps were burning.

The long, lofty, book-walled, shining-floored, leopard rugged, luxurious room! The boy was quite dazed by the grandeur of it all.

The Earl turned impatiently.

"Well, let me see it!"

The boy tugged at the precious possession in his coat pocket, went through a series of acrobatic contortions, finally produced—a revolver!

An oath escaped the Earl's lips.

A clue! He had hoped for a clue. Why, this would prove a world of evidence.

One swift stride; he snatched the weapon, held it so that the light fell on it fully.

An old-fashioned, clumsy revolver, with the initials "R. G." rudely scratched upon it—*one chamber empty!*

He fell back, clutching it, staring at it, one hand pressed to his head, his blue eyes blazing with a stunned, a worldless horror.

"Merciful heaven!" he cried.

And the cry was a prayer for pity.

CHAPTER LIX.

Not a sound save the ticking of the tall Egyptian clock on the mantle.

The Earl stood staring at the weapon he held; the boy stood gaping at the Earl.

He knew it—oh, good heaven! how horribly well he knew it!—*this* was the secret which had lain locked in her cabinet drawer. It was this she had pressed to her lips—had kissed.

The curious construction of the weapon, its antique workmanship and inferior mechanism he had noticed them all before.

And now it was discovered on the spot where a man had been slain—the man between whom and his wife he had fancied existed some secret—had so fancied till within the last twenty-four hours. By the bedside of a dying child all his dark doubts had been dispelled, to rise and menace him again with ten-fold the torture, ten-fold the mystery!

He had missed her during the afternoon of Christmas Day. Iva had sent Lionel to seek her. Sir Geoffrey Damyn had come down by her side.

That night she had vanished, to reappear some hours later so strangely white, so broodingly silent, and she had been so unusually gay all the evening. Her velvet gown was draggled, her slippers wet through, and *now* here was the revolver she had possessed found—Oh, heaven! it was horrible!

With all his strength he endeavoured to control himself, turn to the boy, speak calmly.

"Tell me the exact spot where you found this?"

"About half-way down the avenue, your lordship—way in under the oaks."

"In the snow?"

"The snow had drifted off it. I see somethin' a-shinin', an' I picks it up."

"Wait."

His lordship crossed the room to where stood his own massive, brass-clamped desk of black oak, wherein he kept his business papers.

He unlocked a drawer, deposited the weapon within the tray revealed, closed and re-clicked the key.

He turned on his heel, came back to the lad.

Through one half-curtained window the dawn was grinning ghastily. The grey glimmer mingled drearily with the lamplight. And both touched the pallid and troubled face of the Earl of Silverdale.

"Listen, my lad. You did right to bring *that* to me. Does anyone know you found it?"

The boy shook his shaggy head emphatically.

"What is your name?"

"Rick Pollen, your lordship."

"Well, Rick Pollen, remember this—*no one must know!*"

The young chap stared stupidly at him.

"Can't you hear? Can't you understand?" his lordship cried, sharply. "You are not to tell anyone about what you found. You are to keep your tongue still. Surely you can do that—for money?"

For money! Oh, the magic of the one word! The dull eyes were instantly illumined by a ray of intelligence.

"Oh, yes, sir!"

"What would you do if I were to give you ten pounds?"

Ten pounds! And he had never had ten shillings—never in all his life. The possibility of attaining such wealth fairly took his breath away.

He had wildly hoped his reward might be half a sovereign; but—ten pounds!

"I'd buy a red coat, like the quality wear to the meet, an' a gold watch an' a ring, an' a game bull-dog an'——"

"Stop! And if I were—mind, I don't say I will—if I were to give you twenty pounds—what then?"

The boy looked squarely up at him, exultance of longing anticipation brightening his carrotty countenance.

"I'd go to America!" he said.

He would! His lordship drew a long breath. That was the reply he had been striving to elicit. From the instant he had heard the name of his visitor he had been trying to induce him to make this proposal.

The two elder Pollen boys—their father was a tenant of the Earl—had gone across the Atlantic a year before to seek their fortune.

But what was he about to do? He hesitated. Was there not some such phrase as compounding a felony, which might be applied in this case? Would he not be guilty of complicity if he were to tamper with a witness, endeavour so to screen the real——?

He shook as though chilled.

No matter; she must be screened—she must be saved. She was his wife. Right or wrong, he would shield, defend her—take all chances, run all risks.

"Now hear me."

He brought his white and sinewy hand down on the corduroy shoulder before him with a force which swayed the boy backward, a grip which held him like clasping steel.

"I'll give you fifty pounds—fifty pounds," he repeated, "if you get out of Rothlyn—out of England—within the week, without telling

a single soul about the thing you found. Will you do it?"

His listener showed all his glistening teeth.

"Yes, your lordship!" ecstatically.

He was an ignorant cub. Anything the Earl said he was to do was sure to be right—anyone so tall and strong and splendid as the Earl—anyone dressed so grandly, owning this castle—could not possibly be wrong. If his lordship were to command him to walk to London he would have obediently trudged off.

And now, when he said "go to America," the dream of his life, "and I will give you fifty pounds"—a fortune! all just to keep his mouth shut—great jiminy! *what* luck!

Lord Silverdale bent the boy backward still more with that powerful hand of his, looked sternly down at his face.

"Don't chatter; don't let anyone induce you to talk. Don't drink, or you might blab; and if you were to do that——"

He did not conclude; there was no need to do so. The youngest son of Sam Pollen was evidently impressed by a vision of most terrible consequences were he to break his word.

"No, your lordship, I won't. An' I'll go right away to John an' Luke; an' I won't ever tell—hope to die if I do!"

Lord Silverdale smiled—a grim, sad smile. No oath could be more binding on the boy than his own solemn promise—that he knew.

He went straight to his desk, took out a roll of notes, counted them, brought them back to the hearth, gave them to Rick, with a few final words of caution.

He went with him into the hall, past the bier to the door. Then hurried back and up the stairs.

And from the lounge in the alcove off the library, where the Earl had sat unseen on Christmas Eve, Lionel Curzon rose, dark-browed, aghast, his very heart like lead within him.

CHAPTER LX.

A DULL, gloomy, dun-coloured winter morning—in the air a softness predicting a general thaw. A day with a sadness in it—a sob in it; but at Silverdale Castle life went on with a good deal of its ordinary tranquil flow.

Breakfast, it is true, had been a rather dreary and disjointed affair. The inmates had sauntered down by twos and threes, and drank their coffee, and glanced through their mail in rather silent fashion.

Now and then they asked one another for developments. There were none. The only person apparently possessed of an appetite was Mrs. Vere.

At the brisk tattoo of her knife and fork the fourth of a grouse took wings; the muffins rose—above the triple ledge of that comfortable chin; the buttered toast disappeared with a lightning like rapidity which would have made Hermann wink.

Little Mr. Bariston sat and gazed at her with awe—with absolute envy.

Detecting that questioning look, she pounced upon him.

"Well?"

He jumped.

"I—I di—didn't say anything!" he faltered.

She gave a disdainful sniff, and helped herself to part of an omelet.

Had he offended her? he wondered. He would not do so wilfully. It would be a great deal of enmity to incur—two hundred pounds worth!

"I—I was just w-wishing I c-could en-enjoy—my bre-breakfast as y-you do!"

"Perhaps you would," she responded tartly, "if you didn't enjoy your supper so much."

"I d-don't understand——"

She nodded till all her little curls were bobbing.

"Oh, yes, you do! When Paul Theophilus only wanted a glass of ice-water for breakfast, I," in a dark and thrilling whisper—"I always went and looked at the decanter!"

What a terrible old lady! Poor Mr. Bariston's sparse locks bristled up around the bald spot on his crown.

"My d-dear madam, I h-hope you d-don't m-mean to infer——"

Here a servant brought in a plate of breakfast cakes, hot, crisp and tempting. In truth a sop to Cerberus.

She just took time to blink benignantly at the nervous, little, old gentleman opposite, say blandly, "Oh, of course not!" and then—ah me, for the little brown cakes!

The door opened. Into the pretty breakfast-room came Lady Iva.

Mr. Bariston rose with an air of relief and greeted her cordially. He would take good care never to find himself alone again with that awful old lady in the high head-dress—never!

"Where is Lilian?" demanded Mrs. Vere.

Iva, busying herself with a tray, turned to answer.

"She does not feel strong enough to come down. I am going to send her a cup of tea."

And when she had drank her own she went over to the hearth, knelt on the great Persian rug, held out her hands to the blaze.

Resigned once more to the mercies of Mrs. Vere, Mr. Bariston made a cowardly retreat.

The widow of Paul took her way to the morning-room.

Deftly the servants came and went. Once more in the room reigned order—silence. The minutes passed slowly—laggingly. But still the Earl's daughter lingered there.

She hated to leave the apartment, go out into the hall. When she had passed through, half an hour ago, were they not carrying the corpse into the library where the inquest was to be held? She must remain here till that task was ended.

With all the shrinking of a young, an untried spirit, she dreaded contact with the monster death.

Some one softly turned the handle, came in. Then he paused at sight of her—would have retreated—but she turned and saw him.

His heart gave one great throb as reluctantly he came forward. Reluctantly, because conflicting emotions mastered him. His discovery of the murder the previous evening, the conversation overheard at dawn, had dismayed even his staunch young soul.

That keen, womanly intuition of hers comprehended at half a glance his perplexity, hesitation.

Neither spoke—not even a good-morning. He came over to the mantel, stood leaning against it, looking down upon her as she half knelt, half leaned against a big leathern chair.

She had put on her simplest gown—a dull, soft, clinging, lustreless black. Deliciously it set off the blush-rose tint of her skin, the tawny gold of her braided hair.

It seemed to him afterward his vision, his perception must have been very acute that hour, so distinctly he remembered how perfectly the dusk dress fitted the lissome, supple young figure, and how snowy were the slender strips of linen at wrists and throat.

CHAPTER LXI.

"A TERRIBLE affair!"

"Yes."

And then for a while again they were silent.

Gravely, very gravely, half sadly, the brilliant brown eyes above her were bent upon her.

The poor child! How little she suspected the truth!

The Earl thought it would all lie hidden, unrevealed. But sooner or later such things always came out—always. And she was so proud, so intensely and beautifully proud of that grand old name, home, race of hers. How would she ever bear it?

She was fond, too, of her young step-mother—this gentle, pure, yet spirited and imperious love of his. If he only dare prepare her. But no, it might never come out!

She grew nervous under that prolonged reverie, that dreamy gaze.

Was it altogether the heat of the fire which turned the delicate pink of her cheeks to the crimson of clover?

"Lady Iva, do you think, if you were to discover something almost incredibly horrifying, you could bear it?"

There, it was said at last!

She lifted to his her great violet eyes, wide and wondering as those of a child.

Was this the speech, the cogitation of which had kept him silent, distrait, so long?

"Something *horrifying!*" she repeated. "It has already happened. Poor Sir Geoffrey——"

"Yes, yes," he interrupted, hurriedly. "But suppose someone you knew, someone you cared for, was suspected of having killed him, what would you think?"

Now that he had opened the subject at all, he felt a mad desire to probe her loyalty to the quick.

She rose. And now for the first time she noticed that he still wore his evening suit, though his fur-trimmed overcoat was buttoned above it.

A queer question! But then the tragedy which had last night occurred at Silverdale, aroused queer thoughts.

"I would think," deliberately, "there was a mistake."

"But," leaning eagerly forward, "if you were persuaded there had been no mistake—if all things pointed, all clues attached, to one guilty person—one who had a place in your heart—what then?"

Unconsciously he had put himself in the place of the Countess! Was it not cruel gashing thus for a hidden truth in a girl's heart? What right had he to turn mental vivisectionist?

"Someone I cared for," slowly—"do you mean someone I *loved*?"

There was no faintest trace of coquetry in the clear eyes she lifted frankly.

"Yes."

How fair she looked in that sombre gown, her soft cheeks so charmingly rosy, her head held so prettily and so proudly, her curling-fringed eyes shining like purple-blue stars—how very, very lovely!

"Why, then I would——"

She door was thrown hastily open.

"Come, Curzon!" cried Mr. O'Donnell's voice. "A thousand pardons, Lady Iva, but the inquest has begun, and they want this boy's testimony. Come!"

With a murmured apology, a regretful glance and smile, far more reluctantly than he had entered the room, Lionel left is.

He followed Mr. O'Donnell down the hall into the library. The vast apartment was half-filled.

There were assembled the gentlemen guests of the Earl of Silverdale, the coroner from Rothlyn, fairly swelling with pomposity, the sworn jury all enormously consequential. There, too, was the master of the Castle, looking worn, handsome and haughty as some feudal baron of the oldest days.

The doors were closed, the formal inquiry commenced.

Doctor Cullen examined the wound. The shot had entered behind the ear, had ranged upward, coming out through the temple. There was absolutely no mark of powder, no slightest evidence to show the deadly deed had been self-committed. But what was this?

With a little clinking rattle something had fallen to the floor. It had dropped from the clothing of the corpse.

The painfully excited group assembled clustered together to behold the trinket—a curious little trifle—a cat's eye set in a swivel of Roman gold.

Instantly Lionel Curzon, catching sight of it, started forward.

"It is mine!" he cried.

"Yours!"

Gravely the coroner and the jury regarded him.

The young fellow's own associates evinced no astonishment. The bauble was to them familiar. Lionel had always worn it on his watch-chain.

Now he opened his greatcoat, showed his broken watch-guard.

"I had not missed it. It must have caught in his vest and pulled off when I stooped over him to seek for a sign of life."

The coroner lifted his hand reprovingly.

"We will take your evidence in due time, Mr. Curzon."

The proceedings continued. But the first sensation was as nothing to the second.

Clutched in the tight-shut, rigid fingers of the dead man were *a few short black hairs!*

There had been a struggle then—perhaps for possession of the weapon—at all events a struggle.

Colder, whiter, sterner, grew the face of the Earl of Silverdale.

Once only that chained repose of his broke bounds.

It was when the telegram the deceased had written and failed to send was produced.

Addressed to a well-known London lawyer, it ran as follows:

"Come down as soon as possible, bringing with you copy of papers relating to my marriage with Marguerite Woodville.

(Signed) "GEOFFREY DAMYN."

A hoarse murmur uprose. Married! He had been married, then! They had never fancied any such possibility.

The coroner sniffed. Clearly here was an important clue.

CHAPTER LXII.

THE first step must be to find the wife in question.

The master of Silverdale stepped forward, raised his hand.

Explanation was necessary.

"Gentlemen, no search for the wife of Sir Geoffrey would produce her. She is dead!"

They—particularly the Rothlynites—listened hungrily.

Marguerite Woodville was the sister of my wife, the Countess of Silverdale. She contracted a secret marriage with Sir Geoffrey Damyn. They parted. She died last September. Lately family complications, my wife's doubt as to the legality of the ceremony, made proof desirable. For this proof was the despatch indited."

There was no startling sensation after all. They were quite disappointed, that excited baker's dozen of country folks, to whom the tragedy was pleasant and exhilarating as cakes and ale.

It was not often such a mysterious breeze came ruffling the leaves of their trim, compassed, commonplace lives.

There ensued much discussion, statement, contradiction, deduction, but Lionel heard none of it. He had given his evidence and retired—almost out of hearing.

Her sister had been Damyn's wife!

But why had the Countess cried out, "If you do, I will kill you?"

Do what?

Assuredly there was some motive behind of that awful crime.

The group at the other end of the room glanced now and then, still more frequently, at the stalwart young fellow so lost in heavy thought.

He did not notice them. He had eyes only for the silent, brown bearded man, with that fever of repression illumining his features like inward flame.

He knew the truth; he loved her. His bride a murderess! What slow torture all this pompous prosing must be to him!

And yet he need not cherish such agonizing fear. Surely, surely they would never suspect her!

So he pondered, lounging apart from the others, hearing dully without heeding all their low-voiced talk.

When the jury retired he did not move; still stood so, wrapped in a sorrowful reverie.

Poor Silverdale! It was really hard luck. Even if they never get an inkling of the truth, if it lay buried for ever in Sir Geoffrey Damyn's grave, would not the bitterness of disillusion, of dishonour, be from this day out his everlasting portion?

Alone he stood there thinking it over, his handsome young face, which was gentle as a woman's for all its bravery, its dashing, manly beauty, just now full of pathos, of sweet and sensitive sadness.

He did not notice the jury filing back as he stood with far-away gaze by a porphyry pillar—did not listen to the question asked.

But he heard—clear, ringing, startlingly, frightfully distinct—the words of the verdict:

"We find that the deceased, Sir Geoffrey Damyn, came to his death by a revolver in the hands of some person unknown, but recommend that Lionel Curzon be detained on suspicion."

CHAPTER LXIII.

Now he was no longer dreamful; *now* he was alert, excited!

To detain him—Lionel Curzon! They talked of holding *him* for the murder of Sir Geoffrey Damyn! Oh, it was absurd, preposterous!

He flung back his dark head, sent an indignant glance circling around. Friendly faces met his gaze—faces, too, with condemnation in their very air of evasion.

Impetuously he turned to the Earl.

"Do you hear what they are saying?" he cried.

The furious, resonant young voice, the indignant young face! They touched Lord Silverdale to the heart.

One long, sad look he gave the accused man. But he was silent.

Instantly Lionel recollected—comprehended.

He must not look to the Earl to clear him. To any other—oh, not to the Earl!

He bowed his head; not a word. The action, freighted with submission, with grave politeness and surrender, was all-sufficient.

Some routine matters were transacted, then gradually the crowd thinned out, and Lionel found himself alone with Mr. O'Donnell.

Impulsively he turned to him.

"Will you tell me, Mr. O'Donnell, candidly, what makes them suspect *me?*"

Very troubled grew the rosy face of the old Irishman.

"My dear boy—forgive me, but why should they not? I don't believe you heard one word of the evidence."

He gave a short laugh.

"I don't believe I did."

"Here you had quarrelled with Damyn the day before Christmas. You were supposed to be rivals, you two. You had even gone so far as to use threatening words to him."

"I?"

"You!"

"I never did!"

"You forget," the old gentleman interposed, gently. "The time when all you young folks were decorating the library—you had some sort of a jealous dispute."

Curzon's fine eyes flashed fire.

So her name was to be dragged into this most wretched business, was it?

"What did I say?"

"Something about giving him a reply the following day which you hoped he would relish."

Sure enough! he had said that. But he had meant it in a very different sense from that in which it was taken.

"Well, go on."

There was a burning glow in the smooth, dusk cheeks.

"He left the house, promising to return about half-past ten. About that hour you insisted on leaving. You bring back news of his death. Caught in his coat is your cat's-eye—torn from your watch-chain. Tight in his fingers are grasped some hairs, the colour and length of yours. Don't ask me to say any more, Curzon! Faith and it's not myself would have answered you so much were it not that I knew you asked me to do so as a friend."

Lionel caught the outstretched hand, wrung it heartily.

"I did so ask you, and I thank you," he said.

As for the Earl, with one wild, faint hope animating him, he had hurried out of the library, up the stairway. If he had only been mistaken as to the identity of the revolver he had purchased from Rick Pollen! If it were only one *like* that other.

But no. The boudoir was empty when he reached it; he hastened to the cabinet, touched the spring. Just as he feared—the revolver was *gone*.

And Lionel Curzon, as fine, as frank, as noble a young fellow as lived in all England, was suspected of the crime his (Lord Silverdale's) wife had committed.

That was the case in a nutshell. And it was driving him mad.

He flung out of the room, down the stairs, donned coat and cap, and was out of the house—all in a tearing hurry.

He was stifling in there, under the same roof with her. He must get out—away, anywhere. Down the avenue he hurried, on and on.

Suddenly he paused. Here, just about here, the tragedy must have occurred. The swirling snow had of course blotted out all evidence of a struggle, bidden even the blood-stains which might otherwise be visible.

The place was trampled. A good many morbid sightseers had been there, until the Earl had ordered that the demesne gates be kept locked.

With bowed head, his hands thrust deep in his overcoat pockets, up and down for the distance of twenty yards, and under the oaks and out again, his lordship wandered.

Was he looking for a clue? Could there possibly be anything he hoped to find?

He did not know himself. He only knew that he felt old, disgraced, heartbroken, and that the road before him was so steep, so jagged, he almost wished with Hamlet that "the Almighty had not fixed his canon 'gainst self-slaughter."

To let Lionel, innocent as he *knew* him to be, be taken to prison? or, to tell the truth, and save him? But in that case, Lilian, his wife——

There he stopped. There it seemed all his plans, all his cogitations began and ended. He could think no farther than that—absolutely could not face the possibility beyond.

Mechanically he stooped and picked up a tiny object which had caught his eye. Quite casually, quite carelessly he glanced at it.

A flower—a little, faded, crumpled thing, which someone had dropped here—a faded, red rose.

A red rose!

He crushed it in his hand as though it had stung him. His heart gave one great, sickening leap.

A red rose! and Heaven knows he needed no further confirmation! She had worn red roses at her breast last night!

CHAPTER LXIV.

"LIONEL!"

It was almost a shock to come so suddenly face to face with him.

The Earl was ascending the broadly-balustraded steps.

Curzon had just left the house. On the top step the man met.

"Oh, I'm not yet 'cribbed, cabined and confined,'" the young fellow said, laughingly. "I'm to have a preliminary hearing, you know. I'm going home. Thawing, isn't it?"

It was. The little hillocks and drifts were leveling perceptibly.

The sun had apparently grown weary of sulking, for he was sneaking out from his hiding place at last with a rather feeble but kindly grin.

How handsome, how serene, how superbly nonchalant the young man looked. Surely he could not be at heart indifferent to the awful aspersion cast upon him!

No, not that. The Earl recalled that quick, leonine rage of his an hour ago—the brilliant, passionate gaze he had turned on him—the cry of insulted pride, of anger, of resentment,—

"Do you hear what they are saying?"

Not indifferent—no. And yet how cool he was now—cool and collected. Could he be playing a part? He must be. But for what purpose? If he knew aught of the *truth* he could imagine him feigning thus, to save his friend from shame, his friend's wife from degradation, even at the cost of his own good name.

He could very well imagine him doing that. The Curzons had always been "good haters," after Dr. Johnson's own heart, and are not such always loyal lovers? Blood tells. They were an old race—a grand race—and this their descendant, and the last of the line, was just as true, just as dauntless—reckless, if you will—as any one of his ancestors whose portraits hung below their swords in the old dining-room of Curzon Towers.

But there *was* no reason, his lordship assured himself with an impatient shake. He could not—did not suspect. He was merely, through pride, masking his real feelings with a visor of dare-devilism.

"There is some misunderstanding, my boy. This wretched affair is sure to blow over——"

Where was all his resolution, his confidence, gone? He felt weak as a child. He fairly broke down over the reassuring words.

Lionel laughed lightly.

"Of course there is, my lord. Puck was right, wasn't he,—

"'What fools these mortals be!'"

The Earl eyed him keenly. The face, with the straight, classic outline, handsome nose, square chin, bold, steady, black lashed eyes, was bright and gay and unsuspicious. There had been no bitterness in the parrying reply.

"Have you seen Iva?"

A random shot, but it sped straight home. A sudden gravity swept over—subdued him.

"No," he answered, quietly.

"She will not like to have you leave without——" the Earl began, with nervous politeness.

But Curzon cut him short.

"I think it is better we should not meet, as things are," in a low voice, but with decision.

"But, dear lad, you don't suppose that she, or I, would think——"

The speech, hasty with guilt, remained unfinished.

"I think only well of my friends," Lionel replied, simply.

Then he took out a cigar, lit it, put it between his lips and was turning away, when Lord Silverdale started forward.

"Lionel!" wistfully.

There was a timidity, an appeal in the way he put out his hand.

He was a good man—a sincere, honest, high-souled man—and this passive wrong he was committing, this tacit crime of letting an innocent person suffer, was bitter as death itself to him.

Curzon's hand was out of his pocket in a flash—had clasped the Earl's warmly.

"Good-bye, Silverdale! We're going to have pretty bad roads for awhile, aren't we? Well, I'm off. Tell Mrs. Vere to hold me in her heart; there must be room there for three like me. I would hate to have Bariston cut me out."

And laughing back the last words, he took his erect young figure down the steps, through the melting snow, along the glistening avenue and away.

And the Earl stood and looked after him, with a tightening around his heart, a sudden stern compression of his bearded lips.

CHAPTER LXV.

"You have heard, of course?"

But even as he spoke he knew that she had not.

On the great curving sweep of the first landing father and daughter met. The dark-blue morning suit he wore enhanced his paleness.

She noticed it at once—also his anxious frown.

"I have heard nothing. I've been with mamma, just now with Mrs. Brown."

The light from the painted gothic window above streamed on her golden head and threw above it a rainbow-radiant halo. It touched the pure, fair face, the simple, sombre gown, the pretty patrician hands, the bunch of jingling household keys she carried.

"Curzon is detained on suspicion."

With an effort he brought it out.

She looked at him blankly.

"He is only suspected, you know," hurriedly—"only suspected."

She did not take her glance from his agitated countenance.

"Only suspected of *what?*"

Would she not understand?

He wished emphatically he had left to some one else the task of explanation.

"Of—causing the death of Sir Geoffrey!"

There! To save his own life he could not have said "murdered."

Silence.

He could feel her shining, incredulous eyes piercing all his affectation of ease, flaming through his air of studied calmness.

"Of *killing* him?"

"My dear child, what voice of horror! Yes."

Again a provoking silence.

"Well, Iva?"

His lips like those of poor Marian Erle, "just motioned for a smile and let it go."

"Well, this then!" She drew herself up with flushing cheeks and curling lips and violet eyes of kindling wrath. "I think you ought to be ashamed of yourself—*you*, his friend, to repeat—even to *repeat*—such an infamous lie!"

And she went swiftly away from him down the black and polished stairway, her sunny head held queenly high, her sad and soundless robes trailing behind her.

The Earl went on to his wife's apartments. There was a faint perplexity in his mind.

Did Iva care for Lionel, really care for him? Or was her impetuous defence born of the faith of friendship?

Through the half closed venetians of my lady's chamber, into the green and perfumed gloom, slanted cheerily the yellow December sunshine. Across the rich, deep carpet it lay in heavy deep bars; it touched, like fairy fingers, the ivory keys of the piano; it lit to unearthly and sorrowful beauty the pictured face upon an easel—the face of Guido's Magdalen.

The half-dusk half-lightsome room; the ruddy fire in the glittering grate; the flickering fugitive light; the scent of hot-house flowers—how restful, soothing, delightful it all looked!

But was not my lady here?

Standing at the door, the inner portière half-pushed back, the Earl glanced across the sprawling-legged chairs, the pedestaled Carraras, the little, low, magazine-laden brass tables.

Yes, over there, close to the hearth as usual—for she loves warmth as does a tropical bird—coiled up on a puffy Turkish divan, he saw the familiar childish figure.

She wore a *negligé* of some thick, shiny, creamy stuff, all bordered with silvery fur. It fell over the lounge's edge in heavy, graceful folds. High in the throat, long in the sleeves was the pretty gown, and the face which rose above it was no longer wan and weary as it had looked this morning when she had bent over Geoffrey Damyn's dead body.

He noticed the change as he went straight toward her.

She had been reading evidently. On the rug lay scattered a mass of Christmas periodicals.

"Ah, Harold!"

She raised herself on her elbow, smiled up at him. They had not met since this morning when she had answered him so hotly. She regretted it now—wished at least she had spoken with more self-control.

No answering smile rewarded her graciousness. Within ten feet of her he stood very grave and silent.

It was rather bewildering to her, this unresponsiveness. She had flattered herself into quite an happy frame of mind this morning. All the old romance was over—he who had created it, dead. In his grave it should be buried. She would look back no more. Retrospection was so extremely foolish at best. Damyn was dead—Willie was dead. No tie of those bygone days bound her. No suspicion rested upon her. To her eager vision the years before her stretched sweet and serene, the peace of paradise upon them.

But here was the Earl looking down upon her with an expression new to her—cold, repressive, concentrated.

She laughed, but the sound rang false. She held out one, small lace-ruffled hand.

"What is it, dear? Don't you find my dress becoming? Am I too pale? or were the muffins cold?"

Certainly she was not pale. Indeed she looked extraordinarily pretty. Her cheeks held the vivid tint of the berries which come to the rose-bushes when the roses have fled.

There was an air of satisfaction, *esprit*, about her, almost a gladness, which recalled the girl he had loved and wedded at the old Abbey in Devon.

But no sadness or depression of spirits could have hurt the Earl so terribly as did that look.

He let himself fall into a chair by her favourite desk, a spindle-legged artistic thing of polished ebony inlaid with mother-of-pearl.

"Your dress is exquisite. You look lovely. And the breakfast was perfection. But the verdict was not so wholly gratifying as your gown, your beauty and the muffins."

Something of that contented smile slipped from her countenance. How gravely, satirically, he had said that!

"What was it?"

Fully her large grey eyes met his.

"Curzon is detained on suspicion, and will be tried at the next assizes!"

She sat straight up. The pupils of those large bright orbs of hers dilated with horror.

"Under suspicion of having murdered Sir Geoffrey?" she cried.

She had no hesitation about using that hideous word.

He bowed.

She sprang erect, all those fair, rich draperies of hers swathing her lithe, little body and sweeping around her feet.

"They must be mad!" she panted. "Lionel Curzon! Why, *he* never touched—*he* never harmed him!"

Icy and interrogative the smile with which his lordship regarded her.

"No? You are certain of that? Then perhaps you can tell us *who did?*"

Where was the bloom of the rose-berries now?

She sank down on the divan, colourless and quivering.

"I?" in astonishment too intense not to be feigned. "I? Do you think I am an astrologer—a clairvoyant? What should I know about it?"

What, indeed?

And yet she had shot him dead!

He turned his gloomy gaze upon the fire. And all at once, as though he read it in the glowing coals, he knew *the reason why!*

CHAPTER LXVI.

February!

And the day was almost done.

Hard and ringing were the roads; sweet and stimulating as wine the deliciously frosty air.

Up the Castle road from Rothlyn a horseman came. Firm and restraining was the hand which held the spirited mare in check, grim and stern the face which looked straight ahead.

How was it all going to end? he asked himself, despairingly.

He had just come from the county prison, where Lionel Curzon was confined for the murder of Sir Geoffrey Damyn.

At the preliminary examination the suspicions rife against him had been strengthened by his own curious bearing.

Not one word in his defence would he say. He and Sir Geoffrey had had some hot words—yes. The threatening speech referred to? He had so spoken. He knew Damyn was to return about the hour he insisted on leaving Silverdale Castle? Assuredly! When he had left the house and gone on down the avenue, a riderless horse had passed him. Soon afterward, he had seen quite plainly in the moonlight the body of the deceased. Had he hastened back to give the information? Yes, after convincing himself life was extinct. How then did it happen the groom had come on him standing stock-still below the lighted windows, apparently not intending to enter?

To this question the accused deigned no reply.

Indeed, he said very little any way. He stood up before the good, conscientious, thick-headed magistrates, cool, handsome and wholly non-committal.

They pro'd and con'd and shook their wise heads, and decided it was really awful the idea of committing such a charge on one of the largest landowners in Sussex, and out and-out young aristocrat as that, but they felt obliged to confirm the recommendation of the jury.

He had absolutely no defence. His mere denial was worth nothing. And his attitude of supreme indolence, indifference, indicated a callous conscience, a hardened criminality quite shocking to behold.

So finding conclusively that two and two made four, and flinging in another four for luck, they committed Lionel Curzon for trial at the next assizes, which were to be held in April at Lewes.

And the prisoner had bowed quietly, sent home by his servant the dog which had followed him, and had gone straight to the gloomy old Castle.

There, to-night, the Earl had seen him—had tried to speak praisefully and reassuringly to him—had failed.

He was thinking it all over now as he rode slowly home through the chilly February sunset.

A plucky lad! Not the kind of a man to court notoriety, and here it was thrust on him with deplorable vehemence.

The Earl of Silverdale was famous in more countries than his own—known widely because of his social position, his political influence, his philanthropic endeavours.

The fact that on his estate, at the doors of his home one of his guests had been shot down in cold blood—presumably by one of his own order—was sufficient to draw upon the accused the legion eyes of Europe.

The local and county papers of course made the most of the affair. The London dailies sent down special correspondents, the illustrated periodicals despatched their best artists to Rothlyn.

The case, when it should be called, promised to be one of overwhelming interest.

Was there not a rumour that the prisoner was a rejected suitor, who had murdered his successful rival?

A canard? Perhaps; but it was ecstatically sensational all the same.

So the detectives of the press swarmed through the little town, and planted their cameras before the gaol and sent up their cards to the accused, soliciting an interview; and made their way into the demesne of Silverdale, and grew confidential with the lodge keepers and fraternal with the stablemen, and sent the result of their labours in bulky packages up to London.

And under all this current of excitement ran fiercely, and the Earl knew it—a great horror of, and contempt for, the perpetrator of a deed so essentially detestable and cowardly.

But Lionel himself? Well, he was a mystery. It must gall him terribly, such a proud, high-strung young fellow, all this ebullition of vulgar curiosity, all this keen and cruel condemnation, all this secret scorn and expressed derision and cynical scoring.

But he did not show it—not he!

Never was my lord's own fair daughter, in the chaste and fragrant seclusion of her boudoir, more utterly at ease, more gaily *insouciante* than this suspected murderer lodged in Lewes gaol.

"Steady, Molly!"

He drew in the curvetting creature with a jerk.

He had passed through the gates, was riding up the seldom-used western avenue, and Molly Bawn had flung her delicate head high, and was prancing along in a manner too coquettish to be wholly comfortable.

The greater number of the Christmas guests had gone from the Castle. The few remaining he had really begged to stay, so much he now dreaded solitude.

For between him and his wife a vast and unbridgeable river seemed to roll.

Ever since that morning in her boudoir—the morning of the day after Christmas—he had never wished to hold her gaze with the fondness of his own; had involuntarily shuddered at the sound of her voice.

For then he knew, for then it had dawned on him, that the reason of the death of Sir Geoffrey Damyn was one extremely simple. She—Lilian, his wife—had told the truth on Christmas-eve when she had cried out so frantically, "My own child!" She had not spoken from hysteria—that he knew now.

The boy who died had been hers—born of her—and Sir Geoffrey Damyn was its father.

Incredible? It sounded so; but in that moment by her boudoir fire he knew, as now he also understood, that she had spoken the truth.

Fool that he was not to have seen through the whole flimsy romance at the time!

They had been all together in that tiny room—father, mother and child; and there also was he—he ground his teeth as he recalled it—an outsider, a rank outsider and interloper!

CHAPTER LXVII.

An, there was Ivy Tower. In the wood to his left it stood, a crumbling stone ruin.

When built, for what purpose, no man knew. The records of the old Silverdales gave no clue to the builder.

Square and lofty, and gaunt and windowless, with, huge, half-fallen arches, where the bats and owls skurried and skimmed—with a black and gaping entrance leading into the gruesomely dismal interior, densely covered from the lowest stone to the highest with clinging ivy, the gigantic stems of which actually held it aloft, and between the thick, overlapping leaves of which one probing could not touch the stone itself—there it stood, mediæval, picturesque, unutterably impressive in its desolate decay.

The Earl lifted his head as he walked Molly Bawn slowly by—looked up.

Across the lofty green clad wall, the red reflection on the sinking sun wavered tenderly.

Upward his gaze travelled, above the round and oblong portholes, from which some vandal hand had hewn the ivy—still upward.

That face!

There—up there at that dusky casement.

A fierce oath leaped to his lips. He drew in Molly Bawn with a jerk. He stood erect in his stirrups.

Gone!

Blank—quite blank—was the yawning aperture. His head swam dizzily.

It was no trick of vision, of an over excited imagination. Distinctly he had seen above him in the window of the ruined tower, framed in by the ivied stone, in the crimson flush of the sunset, *his wife's face!*

Why had she come here? Except by curious strangers, the place was never entered from year's end to year's end. What had brought her? Another mystery—another cursed secret?

He sank heavily to his saddle.

Would he fling himself off his horse, rush in, confront, accuse her?

Of what?

And she would be sure to have a trivial, plausible excuse ready. A headache, a stroll, the air, tempted to climb the winding stair.

No, he would not enter! He would go straight home, feign ignorance, watch, and when the right time came strike, if his position and his peerage, his fair fame and grand name were to go to Hades with her! He would, he swore behind his beard—he would, by his Creator! Had she a lover—another—whom she met here?

He had ridden on. He reined in savagely as the thought came to him. He had half a mind to return—make sure.

But instead he lashed Molly Bawn—drove his spurs in her sides, galloped on.

Wait! He would wait till all proof necessary to condemn her, morally and socially for ever, lay under his hand!

He was ready to suspect her of any vileness—he who had been so blindly credulous, so nobly unsuspicious.

The deception of which he had been a victim (how huge a deception he did not dream!), the knowledge that she had shot down this man who had probably threatened betrayal of that old alliance of hers—winged him as heartlessly and deliberately as she would have peppered a partridge—had aroused in him an infinite distrust.

The groom who took Molly Bawn eyed his master inquisitively.

"'Is Lordship aint himself at all," he confided to the harness cleaner. "It used allus to be half-crowns and shillin's and pleasant words. Now hit's nothin' but scowls and swearin'. Hanged if I don't think mattermony is sourin' to the temper—though 'er ladyship is gentle has a kitten, an' sweet has a primrose—Heaven bless her! Stand still there, you Molly Bawn!"

As for the Earl, he strode into the house and straight upstairs to his wife's boudoir.

He would await her here.

He wrenched the door open, thrust back the glowing curtain, and—still belted, booted and spurred—dashed in.

He sprung back.

"Lilian!" he cried.

For there, by a tiny table in the centre of the room, glancing over some sheets of new music, in her dainty dinner dress, fair, fresh and smiling, stood the Countess of Silverdale!

(To be continued.)

I'LL MARRY NONE BUT JIM.

—:o:—

Say what you please of other men,
Their virtues recommend,
There's many an one among the throng
Might please me as a friend;
But if they sought to win my heart,
Their chances would be slim,
For I have made a solemn vow
To marry none but Jim.
I'll marry none but Jim,
For I've pledged my word to him,
And my cup of happiness is full,
And sparkling to the brim.

I know he has a tender heart;
I know he's good and true;
And many a brave, heroic deed
I've proudly seen him do;
And though, compared with some I know,
His purse is rather slim,
In spite of that, I still declare
I'll marry none but Jim.
I'll marry none but Jim,
For poverty with him
Will sweeter be than wealth with one
Whose gold will soon grow dim.

Why, Jim and I were little tots
Together, you must know;
And as a girl I never cared
For any other beau;
If any sorrow touched his heart
The tears my eyes would dim,
And I would most unhappy be
If I didn't marry Jim.
I'll marry none but Jim,
For I am dead in love with him,
And my cup of happiness is full
And sparkling to the brim.

J. P.

RUBY'S DESTINY.

—:o:—

CHAPTER V., AND LAST.

Combe Norton and Combe Magnus had a great deal to wonder at, for Ira Norton had been six weeks at the Court, and yet the date of his departure was not fixed.

The butcher and the baker, the grocer and other tradespeople rejoiced. Priscilla and Sarah had a good time; mutton chops were almost forgotten, and Ruby wondered how many years of fasting would be needed to make up for this long period of riotous living.

She and her cousin were firm friends, but their intimacy had brought upon Ruby the fervent hatred of Cynthia and her mother. Polite and courteous when the gentlemen were in hearing, the amiable pair did not scruple to do all in their power to slight and annoy the orphan in the absence of her protectors. They taunted her openly with her poverty, her father's misdeeds, and her own Bohemian training, but she bore it bravely.

As she told kind Mrs. Ward one day, she really thought the Gordons couldn't help being spiteful—it was in their nature.

But the crowning indignity came at last. Ira had been over to Combe Magnus on business, which he thought would keep him the whole day.

Returning much earlier than he expected, he went up to Ruby's sitting-room with a huge bunch of primroses, purchased for her in the town.

He knocked, but no answer came. It was only two o'clock—a most unusual hour for her to be out—so he imagined, and then the sound of passionate weeping broke on his ear. Only at that moment did he realise all his little cousin had become to him, and how henceforth her joys and sorrows *must* be his.

Pushing open the door he found Ruby in a low chair, her face buried in her hands, sobbing as though her heart would break.

Very gently Ira removed those protecting hands, and, holding them in both his own, begged her to tell him what was the matter.

"Have you had news of your nurse?" for the niece at Dover had been very ill, and required her Aunt's care, so that Deborah's coming to Westshire was still in the future.

"No, oh! no!"

"Then what is it? Look up and speak to me, Ruby. Surely those odious women have not dared to vex you?"

"They are always vexing me," said Ruby, passionately. "There is not a day but that they tell me I am a burden to the Squire, and that you both hate me because my father didn't get on!"

"Ruby, why didn't you tell me?"

"How could I!"

"You know it is not true. I—" his voice shook with emotion—"care for the Court only because it contains you; and eccentric as my father is, abrupt as his manner may seem, I, who know him better than all the world, assure you I have never seen him look at anyone with such affection as comes into his eyes at the sight of you."

"Of course he hates me!" sobbed Ruby. "How can he help it? I would never have come here if I had known it. I will write to Mrs. Dyason, and ask her to find me a situation. I can never face your father again!"

"Ruby," cried Ira, eagerly. "Do you know you are puzzling me terribly? If Mrs. Gordon and her daughter told you you were unwelcome here, they told a wicked falsehood. I think you might take my word before theirs."

"But that was not all!"

"What else?"

"They have gone on like that for weeks," said Ruby, sadly, "and I thought, you know, it couldn't be true; but to-day—to-day they spoke against my mother, and I will never forgive them—never!"

Ira pressed the little hand he held very tenderly.

"The fiends! Ruby, I never knew her, but I have often heard of her. She was the daughter of the village clergyman?"

"I know; and they say,"—Ruby's cheeks grew crimson—"they say she was engaged to your father when she married mine!"

A deep conviction came to Ira it was true. It explained so many things that had puzzled him above all his father's scorn for love matches, and the strange, far-off look on his face that came there sometimes when he talked to Ruby.

"Miss Ward and the Vicar were your mother's dearest friends," said Ira, quietly. "Mrs. Dyason, I have been told, loved her as a daughter. Do you think *they* would hold her memory so dear if she had been false and heartless?"

"Then you don't believe it? Ira, do you know it nearly broke my heart—the fear it was true?"

"Child," said her cousin, earnestly, "I believe—(remember, I am as ignorant of the facts as you, I can but try and put the links of the chain together)—I believe Mrs. Gordon's taunt was true, and false. I wont believe evil of your mother; but she was very young, almost a child, and my father even then was a gloomy, austere man—a widower. Don't you think, urged by her friends, she may have accepted him, and then discovered too late it was the dashing young soldier she loved?"

"But——"

"I know what you would say. It was not right, it was not true. I know all that, but from what I have heard of Miss Fane I think she was one of those gentle, loving creatures who live only in their affections. Perhaps she was too timid to risk a quarrel between the brothers, and so took refuge in flight!"

"Then you *do* believe it?"

"It would explain a great deal that has puzzled me; but ask Miss Ward. Depend on it, *she* knows."

"And I will write to Mrs. Dyason."

"Write to her, by all means, but don't let me tempt you away from the Court. I hope you will stay here always, Ruby, until we ourselves leave the old place, and it is ours no longer."

"Yours no longer! What can you mean?"

"You have trusted me with your troubles, Ruby. Now will you listen to mine?"

He never asked her for a promise of secrecy, he knew it was needless. His little cousin was as true as steel.

She had grown calmer now, and was arranging her primroses in a big glass dish—a pretty figure in her sombre black dress.

"I never thought you had any, except——"

"Except Mrs. Gordon," said Ira, finishing the sentence. "Do you remember, Ruby, I told you once I could not understand my father's infatuation for her?"

"Yes."

"Well, the very next day I found it out. It seems she has a secret of his in her power. He won't tell me what it is. I think, sometimes, it must be an hallucination of his brain. He has led such an honest, upright life there can't be anything to hide in his past. Still, the secret is so real to him that it seems, long ago, he and Mrs. Gordon agreed that, as the price of her silence, I should marry Cynthia."

"They have often hinted as much," said Ruby, in a strange, dull voice. "Cynthia told me only yesterday she should refurnish the Court when she was Mrs. Norton."

"She will never be Mrs. Norton, but she may refurnish the Court. Listen, Ruby; you know I have enough for my own wants. My father has saved a good deal (his craze for economy began, poor old man, with the vague dream of saving enough to buy off Mrs. Gordon), quite as much as he can spend. I have proposed to him to yield up Norton Court to Mrs. Gordon. Her daughter can then be mistress here."

"Yield up the Court! The place where all the Nortons lived and died! Ira, how can you?"

"I prize my freedom more than my home," said Ira, gravely. "And I think I would rather die than marry Cynthia. Were I alone concerned, I should certainly say to Mrs. Gordon 'do your worst,' but my father seems in such terror of her that, for his peace of mind, I cannot defy her as I should like to."

"And when will it be settled?"

"I passed my word to the Squire that I would not speak to Mrs. Gordon about her daughter for three months, but I told him I should deny the engagement on all sides. I have been denying it to-day. Your friend, Blanche Lester, actually asked me when the wedding was to be."

"And of course you told her you would never have a wedding?" said Ruby, seriously.

"I could not tell her so, for my most ardent hope is to be married before the June roses are over."

"You said just now you would rather die than marry Cynthia," objected Ruby.

"So I would! Child, is it possible you don't know whom I have learned to love? We two are the last of the Nortons. I can't offer you our grand old home, Ruby, for it must be forfeited to Mrs. Gordon; but, dear, I love you as my own soul, and I am rich enough to promise, at least, that hardships shall never touch you."

Ruby looked at him with dewy eyes.

"Do you know I almost hated Cynthia when I thought perhaps you would marry her?"

"I never shall! Ruby, I am waiting for your answer. Will you make my happiness?"

"Aren't you afraid to trust me after—after what they say about my mother?"

"No. I would trust you with my life; and, Ruby, if it be as we think, don't you think *she* would like to know that her daughter had atoned for the disappointment she caused long ago by becoming the sunshine of my father's old age?"

"Oh, dear!" said Ruby, suddenly, "how angry he will be, and Mrs. Gordon will be

ready to kill me. Really, you had better change your mind?"

"And propose to Cynthia? Thank you, I would rather not." Then, growing serious, he added. "But, my darling, I will never expose you to Mrs. Gordon's malice. She shall know of our engagement only when I have the right to defend you from all the world."

"Need we tell her at all?" objected Ruby. "I would so much rather not."

He smiled.

"We won't tell her till we are married."

"And that won't be for ages."

"Why?"

"There is no hurry. We are so young, and——"

"I don't call thirty at all young, and *I* am in a very great hurry. Besides, Ruby, don't you think it fairer to Mrs. Gordon for her to know the truth soon? and she shall not know it till you are my wife."

"Why?"

He shuddered.

"I don't like her eyes. I have the oddest idea she might harm my little girl. Now, child, be sensible, and listen to me. Everything points to our being married soon. I told you long ago I never counted on my father's property. The income from my mother's fortune is enough to keep us. I shall insure my life and settle the policy on you. There is no reason in the world for waiting."

"But——"

"I never meant to ask you to go away," he said, gently. "But for my father's absurd fear of Mrs. Gordon, I am quite sure he would consent gladly to our marriage. As it is, I shall not ask him. Ward is a good fellow. I am quite sure he would marry us by license privately some morning in the church. Miss Martha and your little friend from Combe could be the witnesses. Then we would go back to the Court and have it out with Mrs. Gordon. I shall tell her Cynthia can have my inheritance, but you possess a prior right to me."

"But——"

"My dear child, how fond you are of 'buts.' Can't you trust me, Ruby?"

"Perfectly! Only if you're marrying me brings trouble on Uncle John I shall feel there is no end to the wrongs my mother and I have done him!"

"It won't. I went up to London last week and saw Dyason (he asked very kindly after me). I told him just what I have told you about my father's fear of Mrs. Gordon."

"And what did he say?"

"That the Squire was in such wretched health and spirits at the time of his uncle's death, an unprincipled woman could have done anything with him. Dyason believes he has given her a promise in writing that I should marry her daughter, or else——"

"Tell me?" urged Ruby.

"I don't like the idea. I felt ready to knock Dyason down when he suggested it! You know the Court is unentailed. My great uncle left it by will to my father. Dyason fancied there might be a later will bequeathing the estate to some charity; that Mrs. Gordon artfully concealed this; and then, when my father had taken possession, threatened him with publicity unless he agreed to her terms."

Ruby shook her head.

"I don't believe it!"

"Nor I. I should like to defy Mrs. Gordon, because then we could *prove* Dyason wrong."

"If he were right, what would happen?"

"I don't believe my father could have done such a thing, but he might have connived at *her* doing it. There would be nothing for it but to restore everything to the charity (it was Bethlehem Hospital our old uncle was so mad over), with the interest and back rents of the last seventeen years. My father has lived so frugally, it could easily be done, for it is a fact that I don't believe he has ever spent more than the income he inherited from his parents. People might say harsh things of him, though."

"Do you know," said Ruby, "it may be awfully wicked, but I would much rather the poor lunatics had the Court than Cynthia."

"So would I. But, dear, it would be an awful blow to me to think shame could rest on my father. I'd far rather believe in a moment of folly he promised Mrs. Gordon the estate!"

"Ira!"

"Sweetheart!"

"Are you quite sure you want me? Won't you ever regret the price I cost you, since marrying me must lose you your inheritance?"

"I am quite sure, Ruby, that if it comes to choosing between you and the Court, I'll choose you!"

And no one could doubt he meant it.

"Priscilla is devoted to you, Ruby," said her lover presently. "I think you had better plead a headache, and let her bring you your dinner here. I shall be wretched without you, but I don't think I can trust myself if Mrs. Gordon speaks slightingly to you. I shall go and talk to Ward the first thing to-morrow, and then catch the noonday train to London. This is Thursday. If all is as I hope, we shall meet again on Tuesday."

"You will stay away till Tuesday?"

"It is better, dear! I am the worst actor going. I should be sure to betray my happiness, and let people know you had promised to marry me. You are sure you can face small means, Ruby, and that you will be ready by Tuesday?"

Ruby gasped.

"Do you mean we are to be married on Tuesday?"

"Just that, little one! Ruby," touching her black dress, "we are neither of us superstitious. This won't matter. We can dispense with veils and orange blossoms while we have each other!"

Ruby blushed.

"But I have a grey dress," she whispered, "and I would rather wear that."

"Very well, dear! Now listen. I cannot write to you, but I will see that Miss Martha hears everything by Monday. Can you call on her in the afternoon?"

"Yes."

"And, you did not tell me, dear! Are you sure you can be content? Do you know your face would grace a coronet?"

"But I would rather have you. Oh, Ira, I shall miss you so, and oh! what shall I do? If Uncle John is kind to me I shall feel like a deceiver!"

But this difficulty was spared. Early the next morning, after Ira had started avowedly for London, Miss Maud came up to the Court, and meeting Ruby in the avenue, told her she had come to beg her spend a few days with them, and that she would take no denial even if she had to beard the Squire himself to get leave.

Andrew, however, had, doubtless, received his master's orders to be attentive to Miss Norton, for he met the ladies as they entered the house, and at once undertook the errand.

"Miss Ward's compliments, and would the Squire spare his niece to her till Tuesday?" was the message sent; and the prompt answer, "Certainly!" was all that could be desired.

Ruby ran upstairs to pack up a few things, Miss Martha aiding her, and folding with her own hands a soft, grey cashmere (the only garment Ruby possessed not black), without a word of surprise at her young friend's needing such a toilet three months after her father's death.

The kindly brother and sister vied with each other in friendly welcome, and when the clergyman found himself alone for a moment with his young guest, he told her simply he had heard of her engagement, and wished her joy!

"I never believe usually in clandestine marriages; but I am sure in this case anything is better than delay; and if you and Ira can break the spell by which Mrs. Gordon holds the Squire captive, even at the loss of Norton Court I shall say you have done well!"

So it came about that on the Tuesday Ruby put on her grey dress, and met her lover in the old church where her mother worshipped.

Miss Martha and Blanche Lester stood behind the bride, and, to Ruby's surprise, when the solemn question came, "Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?" she good old Vicar of Combe Magnus stepped forward and said, "I do!"

There were a few heartfelt words of congratulation. Then, while Ira, who had come from Gloucester that morning, was refreshed with cake and wine, Blanche Lester helped Ruby to put on her ordinary attire—the very black serge in which she had first come to Norton Court, and then, a few minutes later, the young people were walking to the Court.

"I feel so frightened!" said the bride.

"Dear, you need not!" answered Ira. "If things go very much against us you and Priscilla can pack up your boxes in half-an-hour, and we will go up to London by the noonday train; but, Ruby, I feel sure my father will be thankful to us for ending his thraldom, even if it costs him Norton Court!"

They went in together to the drawing-room, and Ira sent Andrew to tell his father and Mrs. Gordon he wished to speak to them both on important business.

Ruby felt ready to faint, and even her young husband had a sense of embarrassment when he found Cynthia accompanied her mother.

"Ah! you back?" she said to Ruby. At the moment she did not catch sight of Ira.

"You had better have stayed altogether. Cynthia and I feel far more at home without you!"

Enter the Squire.

It never struck either him or the Gordons that Ruby and Ira had returned together. She had sent her hat and cloak upstairs, and was dressed in her usual morning garb.

"I think," said Ira, slowly, "you misunderstood my message, Mrs. Gordon. I wished to speak to you and my father on business. There is no need for us to discuss it before your daughter."

"Stay where you are, Cynthia!" demanded her mother, who seemed changed from the meek, scheming woman they knew into a loud-voiced virago; "and you, Ruby Norton, listen too. Over and over again you've doubted my words that Cynthia had a better right here than you. The young man 'll tell you so himself now he's going to marry her, which is his duty, and what I expected long ago!"

"Pardon me," said Ira, very distinctly, "but I am here for quite a different purpose. I am sorry to speak before Miss Gordon; but you leave me no alternative. In a word, I wish to tell you that under no circumstances can I marry your daughter!"

She glared at him fiercely, his own remark that she reminded him of a tiger flashed on Ruby. Certainly she looked it now. She turned to the Squire.

"Tell him he must—that you are in my power—that I will do my worst if he defies me!"

"Father," said Ira, quickly stopping the agonized entreaty in the old man's eyes, "don't force me to refuse any request of yours. I cannot marry Miss Gordon. Even if I wished it, it would be illegal; I have a living wife!"

"Then she will never be mistress of Norton Court!" said Mrs. Gordon, hoarsely. "See!" and she took from her bosom a folded paper yellow with age, "this is Walter Norton's last will and testament. It is dated years after the one under which your father inherited, and his name is not mentioned in it. His uncle had disappointed us both—he had promised us both handsome legacies, and he broke his word. I offered your father fair terms: I would suppress the second will provided he gave me a home for life, and that my daughter married his heir. You thought, I suppose," she said, bitterly, "that I destroyed the will,

["OF COURSE YOUR FATHER HATES ME!" SOBBED RUBY. "I WOULD NEVER HAVE COME HERE IF I HAD KNOWN IT!"]

but I was not such a fool! I kept it just as I found it; not even curiosity would let me break the seals lest the law should declare it had been tampered with. I know nothing of the contents; it was made a week before the old man's death, when he was angry at his nephew not coming, and accused me of keeping him away. He told me then we should neither of us touch a penny of his money."

A knock had come unheard at the door. It was repeated now; and Andrew, unbidden, ushered in Mr. Lester, whom it had been agreed should follow the bridal pair to the Court to satisfy the Squire of the perfect legality of their union.

"Sir," said Ira, snatching the folded paper from the floor, where Mrs. Gordon had thrown it, and giving it to the old clergyman, "you are not only a minister of Heaven but a magistrate; in both capacities I entrust to you this document. This woman"—he pointed to Mrs. Gordon—"declares it to be the last will of my father's uncle, Walter Norton, and for her own ends she has hidden it all these years!"

The Vicar darted a look of quiet scorn at the widow, then he turned his whole attention to Ira's father.

"My dear friend," he said, simply, "her actions would have no weight to injure you. If this will bequeaths your uncle's estate and fortune to the Bethlehem Hospital—he often talked of making that charity its heir—you will, of course, have to yield up both; but your private income from your father and your wife's portion is so large, that if you had to give up every penny you had received from this estate all these years, with interest, ay, and compound interest, you would still have enough for a simple, refined life!"

"And Ruby and I will cheer you up," said Ira, gaily. "I didn't tell you before because I knew you were frightened of those fiends," and he indicated the Gordons; "but we were married this morning, and you have two children instead of one. Never mind if you have to leave the Court; we will make a home for you!"

The old man wrung his son's hand and kissed Ruby's forehead.

"Vera's child," he whispered. "It is strange. I always loved her—always!"

"I think," said Mr. Lester, seeing Mrs. Gordon made no attempt to stir, "I had better open this document. You, Mr. Norton, will, of course, act as master of the Court until your uncle's newly-discovered will is proved. But it would be a satisfaction to us all to know the contents."

"Everything goes to the lunatics," said Mrs. Gordon, defiantly. "And you're robbing them every hour you stay here!"

But she was mistaken. The will was very short, hardly covering one side of the paper; but it was strictly legal. Walter Norton left everything he had in the world to his esteemed friend and lawyer, Charles Dyason, to keep in trust for his great niece Ruby Norton until she married or came of age, when she was to enjoy the full income for her life, and the principal and estate were to revert at her death to her eldest child.

"How providential!" breathed the Vicar. "It will really make no difference, since the young people have become one."

"It makes all the difference in the world!" said Ira, bitterly. "I shall feel like a fortune-hunter all my days."

The words had hardly left his lips when Ruby sprang forward. Before anyone divined her purpose, she wrenched the paper out of Mr. Lester's hand and threw it in the centre of the fire. Instantly, as they tried to rescue it, it was too late; it had become mere charred atoms.

"There," said Ruby, triumphantly, "I've settled everything. No one can ever ask whether Uncle John knew about the will, since no one will hear of its existence; and all the world pity you, Ira, for marrying a 'pauper.'"

But the effect on John Norton was almost magical. He turned to Mrs. Gordon with chilling courtesy.

"Thanks to that dear child, I am at last master in my own house. May I request that you and your daughter end your visit to us as soon as possible!"

They went that very day. Not long after Mrs. Gordon showed symptoms of mania, and was admitted into an asylum. The Squire settled a hundred a-year on Cynthia, so she never had to work for her living.

Ira took his bride to Paris for a long honeymoon, and in their absence the Court was renovated from top to toe, and a special suite of rooms beautified for its young mistress.

Mr. Lester kept the secret of that April morning even from his own wife; the version given to the world was that the Squire had been completely under the influence of his housekeeper. His son had broken the spell, and sent the woman off.

With the home coming of his young wife a new era was to dawn. And so it did.

The "county" came in full force to welcome Mrs. Norton, whose sweet face and foreign grace charmed them all.

With Deborah as housekeeper, and Priscilla as cook, the Court held its own in genial hospitality.

Miss Martha, with tearful eyes, declared it did her good to see Vera's child take her place among the great ladies.

The Lesters rejoiced in their young friend's prosperity, while dear old Mrs. Dyason, of course, recalled her own prophecy.

"I told you so," she said to her husband. "You know when she was here I said it was written in her face that she would marry young, and you see I was quite right about RUBY'S DESTINY."

[THE END.]

BEAUTIFUL bubbles are but glittering emptiness.

[THE DETECTIVE SCORES A SUCCESS!]

NOVELETTE.]

MISSING.

—:o:—

CHAPTER I

Sorrow and suspense reigned supreme at Shirley Hall, a large, handsome Elizabethan mansion, situated in one of the prettiest parts of Devonshire. A vague, terrible bereavement had turned the bright hopes and joyous anticipations, so recently indulged in by its inmates, to tears and mourning.

Just when the domestic atmosphere was clearest, when all things indicated a long spell of fair, radiant weather, the cloud had arisen, blotting out each glad future prospect, and condemning those most closely concerned to an indefinite agony of suspense, harder to bear than the worst possible authentic tidings.

The cause of this sorrow was so strange, so inexplicable, that it admitted of no precedent. Fred Shirley, the heir to a splendid estate, young, wealthy, handsome, about to be married to the girl whom he passionately loved, had disappeared suddenly, leaving no clue by which he might be traced, alleging no reason for his extraordinary conduct.

It wanted only a fortnight to the date of the marriage, for which preparations were being made on a lavish scale, when Fred Shirley had ordered his horse to be brought round to the door, and expressed his intention of riding into Barminster, the nearest town, some five miles off, as he had business to transact there. His *fiancée*, standing on the wide stone terrace in front of the hall, had watched him canter down the avenue that breezy, sunlit, spring morning, when all nature seemed full of glad, rejoicing life. He had turned round to wave his hand to her, a smile on his handsome face, before reaching the lodge-gates. Then he had disappeared to return no more to the women waiting and watching in vain for his arrival.

When his prolonged absence first gave rise to alarm Mrs. Shirley had sent to Barminster to make inquiries. Fred Shirley, it transpired, had left his horse in the care of the ostler at the "Blue Boar." Three hours later he had gone to the railway station, and taken a ticket to Elmsleigh Junction, a well-known local centre a few miles off, from which trains radiated out in every direction. Beyond the junction they had failed to trace him. It was obvious that he had sought to frustrate any attempt to discover his destination by going to the Junction. Had he booked straight through from Barminster, where he was so well known, this would have been impossible; but in the crowd of passengers at the Junction, no one individual was likely to be remembered by the ticket clerk. His movements in the interim they could not ascertain.

Loth to reveal her son's strange disappearance at such a time, Mrs. Shirley had striven to keep the inquiries set on foot strictly secret. Then, as the days flew by, bringing the date of the wedding ever nearer, her suspense and terror increased.

Appearances, public opinion, could no longer be studied in the face of such a calamity.

No tidings of the absent one reached Shirley Hall to relieve her tortured mind.

The news spread like wildfire that Fred Shirley had vanished mysteriously.

The general opinion was that he had met with foul play, and much sympathy was bestowed upon the ladies at the Hall.

A large reward for any information respecting his present whereabouts or possible fate was offered. The bill containing a description of his personal appearance was affixed to the police-board at every police-station throughout the United Kingdom. It hung there side by side with the printed inquiry for the man who was "wanted" in consequence of deserting his wife, and the donkey which had strayed away from its lawful owner.

Yet this public announcement and the large reward offered failed to elicit any facts with regard to Fred Shirley's fate.

The cleverest detectives Scotland Yard could furnish were employed by Mrs. Shirley to trace her son; yet they, too, were at fault. Had the earth opened and swallowed up the young man, he could not have disappeared more completely.

Fred Shirley's strange absence had arrested all the bridal preparations. The bride-elect's splendid *trousseau*—a triumph of the fashionable *modiste's* skill—was laid by, unregarded. The wedding breakfast, the invitations, the presents, the many projects in connection with such an important event, were all set aside, greatly to the disappointment of the many young people who had hoped to participate in the bridal festivities.

Fred Shirley had been missing exactly a fortnight, when his mother came down one morning to take her accustomed seat at the breakfast-table.

She was a tall, fair, ample woman of forty-five, with a calm, high-bred manner, and a matronly beauty of form and feature that still attracted admiration.

Beneath that quiet exterior Mrs. Shirley possessed great strength of character and deep affections. None of her dependents had ever heard her voice raised in anger, yet she ruled with a firm hand, which won for her both respect and liking.

The belle of the county in those days, she had married Frank Shirley, a wealthy county gentleman of good family, at the age of twenty.

Frank, who had previously led a very fast life, settled down after marriage and made an exemplary husband.

Theirs was a love-match, pure and simple, and the advent of a son—the only child ever born to them—had but served to draw the husband and wife yet closer to each other.

When Frank Shirley died, all the love of which his widow was capable became concentrated upon their son. He helped to console her for the loss she had sustained.

The two were in perfect sympathy with each other. No ill-feeling had ever estranged them.

Fred's contemplated marriage met with his mother's warmest approval, thus rendering it still harder to account for his disappearance.

Mrs. Shirley was pouring out the coffee when Amy Winsome, Fred's *fiancée*, entered the breakfast room and took her seat at the table, followed in a few moments by her cousin Dora.

Amy Winsome was a slender girl of twenty, with soft, wavy, dark hair coiled in a thick knot, large, velvety dark eyes, a delicate rose-leaf complexion, and sweet mobile lips. The fact of her being somewhat short-sighted in no wise detracted from her beauty. It rather added to it, by reason of the intense, earnest glance with which she read the faces of others in order to catch their true expression. In repose the girl's face was somewhat chill and haughty, but when a smile rippled over it the charm was irresistible.

The orphan daughter and heiress of Frank Shirley's dearest friend, she had been left to his sole guardianship when her father died. Death in turn depriving her of this guardian, she had remained on at the Hall with Mrs. Shirley, to whom she was closely attached, and who stood to her in the place of a mother.

From childhood Fred Shirley and Amy Winsome had been constant companions. Friendship with them had merged into love, easily, imperceptibly, as a mountain stream widens and deepens until it becomes a river. A year ago, Fred had revealed his passion for her, to find it fully reciprocated. The two young people had met with no obstacles in the way of their wooing. Both were wealthy and well born. A more desirable match, from a worldly point of view, could hardly have been arranged, while the fact of their being so deeply in love with each other gave a tinge of romance to it, redeeming it from the commonplace.

Such exceptionally favourable auspices seemed almost ominous. Theirs was too red a dawn, and, when they least expected it, the storm fell. Just previous to their marriage, without rhyme or reason, Fred Shirley had disappeared.

"Amy, my child, you are making no breakfast," said Mrs. Shirley gently, when the footman had quitted the room. "You will be ill unless you take more food than you have done lately. Let me give you some of this omelette."

Amy, who had been trifling with a piece of dry toast, looked up swiftly, her soft dark eyes full of unshed tears, her face white and weary.

"I am not hungry," she replied. "I feel as if food would choke me. Auntie, you have not forgotten, surely? This was to have been our wedding day, and now——"

She broke down completely, and her sobs became hysterical.

Rising from her seat, Mrs. Shirley went up to the girl, and put her arms around her.

"Forgotten!" she said, sadly; "no, Amy; but I would not add to your pain by any allusion to it. My darling!" stroking the pretty dark head pressed against her bosom with soft, caressing touch, "for Fred's sake strive to compose yourself, to bear up bravely until—until he returns. He would be so grieved to find you ill."

"Will he ever return?" asked Amy, passionately. "If he were alive and well—able to communicate with us, would he permit us to remain in suspense and uncertainty respecting his fate—he who was always so kind and thoughtful? Ever since he disappeared I have cherished a faint hope that *some* tidings of him might reach us on what should have been our wedding day. Were he still alive he could not have allowed it to pass unrecognised. Even this hope has forsaken me now. Fred is gone. We shall never see him again. He has met with foul play!"

Mrs. Shirley shuddered involuntarily.

Strong-minded, self-possessed as she was, her own fears were fast gaining the mastery.

"Heaven forbid!" she murmured. "In that case I should be indeed desolate. Oh! my boy, my boy, what evil fate has overtaken you? I cannot—will not, believe that you have ceased to exist. Amy, dear, we must hope a little longer. Fred had no enemies, remember. Why should any one seek to take his life?"

"Motives of robbery might have induced them to do so, since he is known to be wealthy," said Amy, wearily.

"But he is so strong, quite capable of defending himself against two ordinary men!" urged Mrs. Shirley. "Besides, the fact of his taking a ticket to Elmsleigh Junction points to a voluntary disappearance on his part. It renders the affair doubly mysterious!"

"I suppose Mr. Shirley has not contracted any extensive debts, which he failed to bring under your notice?" hazarded Dora Winsome, speaking for the first time.

"He is not extravagant in his expenditure," was the reply. "Even if he were, he has ample funds at his disposal, apart from my income, which would, he well knew, be his to draw upon in the event of liabilities he could not otherwise meet. No, his disappearance cannot be accounted for on these grounds. The motive must be sought for in some other direction."

Dora looked thoughtful and sympathetic. She was a pretty girl of one-and-twenty, with a fair complexion, golden brown hair, and eyes deep and blue as the summer sky; not the light, shallow orbs of that colour which indicate a chill, crafty, calculating nature.

She had a little income of her own, amounting to about two hundred a year. Three years previous she had come to Shirley Hall as companion to her wealthy cousin, and had remained there ever since.

But Dora's sympathy, although genuine, could not go beyond a certain point. She had never been in love; stranger still, she had no desire to be. She could not enter into the feeling that renders a woman indifferent to all men save the one who has taken her heart by storm, and occupies it exclusively. Young, happy, self-reliant, Dora thought it rather absurd to let your happiness pass out of your own keeping into that of somebody else, who may or may not play pitch and toss with it. She liked masculine society, without, however, having the least desire for lovers—a somewhat unusual state of things when a pretty girl is in question.

Yet, although Dora was inclined to scoff at lovers' woes, and to be sceptical as to their reality, Amy's sorrow, which came under this heading, was too genuine to be underrated. The girl felt extremely sorry for her cousin, whose promised happiness had been thus suddenly overcast. She aided Mrs. Shirley in her efforts to soothe and console Amy. Presently the latter rose and went to her own room, Mrs. Shirley accompanying her.

"Auntie, auntie, how am I to bear it?" she asked appealingly, as her guardian's widow, to whom she always applied this title, bathed her burning forehead with eau-de-Cologne. "Why, only a few weeks ago I pitied girls whose lovers were compelled by circumstances to leave them for weeks and months at a stretch, and wondered how they bore their absence. I thought I could not exist apart from Fred. Now I have lost him. I have not even the poor satisfaction of knowing how and when he came by his end. This fearful mystery—it is killing me!"

"Amy, darling, we must wait, and put our trust in Heaven," was the whispered response. "As long as we do that Heaven will never forsake us."

"If we had quarrelled," moaned the girl, "it would seem less strange; but Fred and I never fell out. He kissed me before starting that morning, and promised to be home in time for seven o'clock dinner. I am *positive* that he had no idea of leaving me then never to return. What can have happened later on to induce him to do so?"

"That is what I would give all I possess to know," replied Mrs. Shirley. "Lie down for an hour, my dear, and try to get a little sleep. Otherwise I must ask Dr. Drew to give you a sedative. This afternoon Mr. Lyon, the private detective I have been recommended to employ, will arrive from town. Although only a young man, he is said to be very clever in his profession. He may succeed in throwing some light upon this mystery."

"Let me know when he arrives," said Amy, earnestly. "I should like to see him. I think I could tell at a glance if he is likely to succeed in restoring Fred to me."

Mrs. Shirley promised, and then quitted the room, leaving Amy alone. The dreariest and saddest of wedding-days dragged itself on somehow, devoid of all the mirth and revelry and feasting that should have distinguished it. The spring twilight was setting in when Herbert Lyon, the private detective, arrived at Shirley Hall.

He had already made a reputation for himself by the clever manner in which he had succeeded in tracing a stolen child and restoring it to its parents, after which he had quitted the force and set up in business for himself, commissions flowing in rapidly.

As he entered Mrs. Shirley's drawing-room, where that lady sat with Dora Winsome, he looked quietly around, taking in each detail in that keen comprehensive glance.

Herbert Lyon was a tall, well-made man of five-and-twenty, with dark and somewhat deep-set eyes, regular features, and clean-shaven lips. There was an air of instinctive good-breeding about him, with a quiet consciousness of power possessed which imparted confidence to all he said and did, yet devoid of all presumption or effrontery.

As she rose to receive him, Mrs. Shirley started slightly. Her eyes rested upon the detective's face with a wandering, astonished expression.

"Mr. Lyon, you find us in great trouble," she said, recovering her self-control, "in consequence of my son's unaccountable absence. I want you, if possible, to ascertain what has become of him."

"Certainly, madam," replied Herbert Lyon, and his voice deep, firm, resolute, seemed to restore confidence to the anxious woman. "I left town immediately upon the receipt of your letter to commence the search for Mr. Shirley. It would appear, from the facts stated, to be a somewhat exceptional case."

"We are utterly at a loss to account for his disappearance," said Mrs. Shirley. "My son and I were always on the most affectionate terms. Moreover, he was to have been married as to-day. His non-appearance to fulfil his marriage contract points to some serious, if not fatal, calamity."

"Mr. Shirley has never stayed away from home before without informing you of his intention?"

"Never!"

"You will pardon the question; but, was he labouring under any pecuniary embarrassment?"

"No. At this moment he has a large balance at his bankers."

"And the young lady to whom he was about to be married?" continued Herbert Lyon, glancing at Dora, who sat there listening to the conversation.

"She is not present," said Mrs. Shirley, "you may speak freely."

"May I ask if the attachment was reciprocal?"

"It was. My son loved her as dearly as she loved him. There was no jealousy—no ill-feeling between them. I am certain the engagement was entered into of their own free will and desire."

"I am willing to admit," said Herbert

Lyon, thoughtfully, "that a stranger case never came under my notice. People frequently disappear; but their motive in so doing is, as a rule, easily traced. Here the motive seems to have been entirely lacking. Did the nature of the business which Mr. Shirley went to Barminster that day to transact ever transpire?"

"No," said Mrs. Shirley. "I, thinking it was in some way connected with his approaching marriage, unfortunately made no inquiries. This envelope," producing one, "was found in his bedroom grate. It had evidently been received by him that morning. The handwriting is unknown to me. You see the envelope bears the Barminster post-mark. The letter it contained was probably burnt."

Herbert Lyon examined the envelope addressed to "Frederick Shirley, Esq.," in clear, bold caligraphy, very minutely, then he transferred it to his pocket-book.

"With your permission I will keep this for awhile," he said, addressing Mrs. Shirley.

"Do so by all means," she replied. "What measures do you purpose taking in the first instance?"

"I shall go to Barminster," he said, "and make some informal inquiries there. I shall stay at the 'Blue Boar' as a commercial traveller in the fancy goods line. You will not forget my assumed character, should you have occasion to communicate with me. Needless to say, should any important news transpire, I shall at once inform you to that effect."

"If you can but succeed in restoring my son to me," said Mrs. Shirley, with deep emotion, "in solving this dreadful mystery, no reward will be deemed too great in payment of such a service. Follow up any clue that presents itself, and spare no expense. You must not leave until you have had some refreshment."

"I should prefer waiting until I arrive at the 'Blue Boar,'" said Herbert Lyon, courteously. "By ordering a meal there I shall gain an opportunity of questioning the servants. I wish to lose no time. The scent, so to speak, may be growing faint already."

At this moment Amy entered the room, Mrs. Shirley having sent a servant to summon her. Her sombre dress and sweet, sad face, from which all the delicate bloom had fled, appealed to the detective's sympathy as she approached him.

"Amy, love, this is Mr. Lyon," said Mrs. Shirley. "He is going at once to commence the search for our lost one."

"You will do your utmost to find him?" said the girl, addressing Herbert Lyon appealingly. "To restore him to us. Living or dead you will strive to ascertain his fate? We—we were to have been married as to-day!"

"I will spare no effort to relieve your suspense," he replied earnestly, with an air of manly deference. "Meanwhile, do not abandon all hope. These strange disappearances do not always point to fatal results."

"A very superior young man," remarked Mrs. Shirley, when he had left them. "And what a remarkable chance likeness! It positively startled me."

"Likeness to whom?" asked Dora.

"To my late husband when he was a young man. Mr. Lyon closely resembles the portrait of him hanging over the mantelpiece in my bedroom."

"I thought his features seemed strangely familiar," said Dora, slowly. "Yes, Mr. Lyon is handsome and well-bred. He might be a gentleman. Yet I—I don't like him. It would take very little to make me hate him outright."

CHAPTER II.

Herbert Lyon walked into Barminster, having refused to avail himself of the dog-cart placed at his disposal by Mrs. Shirley.

The young detective was thinking deeply as he walked rapidly along the deserted country road in the gathering darkness.

"What can have become of that fellow?" he mused. "His strange disappearance on the eve of his marriage could hardly have been unpremeditated; yet the ladies at the Hall are evidently of that opinion. They can assign no reason for it; all is fair and open with them, admitting of no suspicion, no reservation. He must have kept his secret well, supposing him to have one. There is often a dark page in the volume of a young man's life which his friends are never permitted to read.

"Well, if I can only unearth Mr. Shirley, and bring this extraordinary case to a successful issue, it will add greatly to my reputation. He must be an unappreciative individual to leave so lovely a girl in distress. They are both lovely, but the fair one with the blue eyes impressed me most. I like high-breeding and refinement in a woman, why, Heaven only knows, since my position cuts me off from that type completely! Dora, I think Mrs. Shirley called her.

"I wonder if I am fated ever to see her again? Those glorious eyes of deepest azure seem to haunt me! I must shake off this folly, and devote all my faculties to the case in hand.

"Has Mr. Shirley met with foul play? I am inclined to think not; but, living or dead, I mean to find him!"

Herbert Lyon ordered a room and a substantial supper when he reached the commercial hotel known as the "Blue Boar," and giving his name as Mr. Arthur Smythe, informed the landlady that his samples would arrive some time to-morrow.

His manner as he stood in front of the fire in the large, comfortable parlour allotted to commercial travellers had undergone a subtle change. It was easy, familiar, insinuating.

The waiter as he laid the cloth talked briskly to this pleasant young "gent," and presently the conversation, confined chiefly to local topics, turned upon Fred Shirley's disappearance.

In a small town like Barminster, where people starved for news or sensation of any kind, such an event was sufficient to keep them going for weeks. It formed the chief topic among all classes.

The Shirleys were so well known and respected throughout Barminster. They were county people of high-standing, and the fact of the son and heir being missing kept the town on tip-toe with excitement.

"Young Mr. Shirley left his 'orse here, sir, that very mornin'," said the waiter. "I never saw him look in better health or spirits when he went away. He had a drink, and tipped me a shilling before going out; and, as the song says, he never came back any more."

"Which way did he go on leaving the hotel?" asked Lyon, carelessly.

"Straight down the High-street. Nobody seems to have set eyes on him after that till he went to the railway station three hours later, and took a ticket for Elmsleigh Junction. It's a very sad affair. There was his 'orse standing saddled at the door at six o'clock, as he had given orders, ready to take him home to the Hall, and he gone nobody knows where."

Herbert Lyon ate his supper, smoked and played billiards with the other commercials for awhile, then went to bed. He was up and out in good time next morning for the ostensible purpose of soliciting orders from the local tradesmen, in reality to discover how Fred Shirley had spent those intervening hours between his arrival at the "Blue Boar," and his abrupt departure from Barminster.

"Something must have happened, then, to induce him to go away," mused the detective, "to efface himself in this manner. I believe now that his flight was unpremeditated. The order received by the ostler to have his horse in readiness for him at six o'clock, unless a *ruse*, would imply that he contemplated going home as usual. The question resolves itself into this—where did he go on leaving the "Blue Boar?" And whom did he meet?"

Strolling down the High-street, he turned out of it presently, to avail himself of a short cut through a dull, respectable side street, in order to reach the market-place, which a boy informed him lay beyond it. The houses, on a level with the street, presented a severe mournful aspect. Herbert Lyon's eyes fell upon a "To Let" card in a ground floor window as he went slowly along. It was not a printed card, merely writing in clear, bold caligraphy with pen and ink. Inspecting it more closely, the young man came to a standstill. Drawing out his pocket-book he compared the written address on the envelope received by Fred Shirley with the writing on the card in the ground floor window. They corresponded exactly. The peculiar flourish that distinguished the capital letters was not to be mistaken. The same hand must have written both card and envelope.

A gleam of repressed excitement shone in Herbert Lyon's dark eyes. Ringing the bell at that house he waited until the door was opened by a very untidy servant girl with a freckled face and rough red hair.

"You have a furnished room to let?" he said, interrogatively.

"Yes, sir; please, sir," responded the slavey. "It's the first floor front. Six shillings a week, and hextras. Missis is out now, but I can show you the room."

Herbert Lyon went upstairs, took a survey of the room to let, then came down again to the parlour on the ground floor.

"Who wrote that card in the window? You?" he asked, with a smile.

"Lor' bless you, no, sir," replied the girl, with a giggle. "I can't write, and missis ain't much of a hand at it either. That's why she got the lady who was stopping here to write that there card out for her."

"Indeed. And is the lady gone?"

"Yes; she went about a fortnight ago. She had the first floor front while she stayed here."

"Did she remain long?"

"She only took it for a few days. Don't you go for to think the lodgin's ain't comfortable on that account, sir. She never meant to stay longer."

"I see. Was she a young lady?"

"Sakes alive no! Fifty at the least, with thick, black eyebrows, and a reg'lar moustache on her upper lip, and *sich* a voice—as deep as a drum."

"Not by any means the sort of lady that a young man would be likely to fall madly in love and elope with," mused the detective. "Such a woman would probably write a firm, bold hand." Then aloud,—

"Did this lady, Mrs.——"

"Macfarren," said the girl.

"Ah, Mrs. Macfarren! Did she have any visitors while staying here?"

"Not as I knows on," was the short reply, as a wave of colour surged into the freckled face. "I never saw any."

"A lie," thought the detective, glancing keenly at the servant's flushed, conscious face. "She is keeping something back."

"That is false!" he said, sternly, assuming a knowledge he did not possess. "Mrs. Macfarren had at least one visitor. Young Mr. Shirley came here to see her."

Mary Ann started, then burst into a flood of tears.

"I never told you so," she sobbed. "Missis said if I ever mentioned it she'd discharge me without a character."

Herbert Lyon's *ruse* had proved successful. He knew now how those intervening hours had been spent.

"How often did Mr. Shirley come here to see her?" he asked. "Since I know so much, you may as well tell me the rest. If you speak the truth you will be rewarded, if not, you will be made to state what you know!"

"As true as I'm alive, sir, Mr. Shirley only came here once," said Mary Ann amidst her

tears, "and that was on the very day he disappeared. He and Mrs. Macfarren were talking for more than two hours together. Then he went away, and I don't know no more than the dead where he went to, neither does missis. She didn't want her name dragged into it, so, when Mr. Shirley was said to be missing, she told me to hold my tongue about his having called here, and —oh, my goodness, here she comes! I shall catch it!"

The landlady, a small, shrewish-looking, light-eyed woman, in widow's weeds, entered the house and the parlour at this moment. Herbert Lyon came forward in answer to her sharp, inquiring glance.

"Mrs. Ludley, I am a detective," he began, very quietly. "It has come to my knowledge that Mr. Frederick Shirley visited a lady at your house previous to his mysterious disappearance from home. I have questioned your servant upon the subject, but she is very reluctant to reply, consequently I come to you for information. May I ask why you have not come forward to state all you know respecting Mr. Shirley's movements?"

"Because, as a respectable woman who gets her living by letting lodgings, I didn't wish to be mixed up in such a case, and have police coming to and fro to my house, and my name on everybody's lips," replied Mrs. Ludley in a thin, high-pitched voice, "that's why. I can't tell you where Mr. Shirley is, and if that girl——"

"She is not to blame," interposed Herbert Lyon. "She would tell me nothing. Now, Mrs. Ludley, if you are wise, you will prove less reticent, otherwise the law will compel you to speak. What do you know of the lady who occupied your first-floor front a fortnight ago?"

"Nothing, except that she came here from London for change of air, and went back to London again the very day after Mr. Shirley called to see her," said Mrs. Ludley, on the verge of tears; "and that's the blessed truth. She was elderly and very respectable-looking. She paid her way like a lady. It *is* hard that I should live to have the law thrown at me, after paying rent and rates, likewise taxes, all these years!"

"The only blame attached to you is that you failed to come forward and give what information you could, when urgently requested to do so," replied Herbert Lyon. "You will not be held responsible for Mr. Shirley's disappearance. How often did he call here?"

"Only once; I'll take my oath of that. He stayed a long while, and when he went away I noticed that his face was as white as death. I let him out, and he hardly seemed to know what he was doing; he looked like a man in a dream. I have never seen him since. The next day my lodger left."

"Did she ever ask you or your servant to post a letter addressed to Frederick Shirley, Esq.?" asked Lyon.

"No; if he received such a letter she posted it herself. She was always very close about her affairs."

"Exactly. Mrs. Macfarren wrote that card which is now in your window?"

"Yes. I'm no scholar, and I asked her to write it large for me, to save buying a 'Let.'"

"May I look at it?"

Mrs. Ludley took the card from the window, and Herbert Lyon once more compared it with his envelope. Beyond doubt the handwriting in each instance was Mrs. Macfarren's.

"And you have no idea as to the particular part of London this lady came from?" he asked.

"Not the slightest. She never breathed a word about herself the whole time she was here. I hope I shall get into no trouble over this?" as Herbert Lyon turned to go.

"Certainly not," said the detective, reassuringly. "You may be called upon to repeat this statement—nothing more. Good morning, Mrs. Ludley."

Leaving that lady to scold her maid, to whom he had administered half-a-crown, at discretion, Herbert Lyon went straight away to Shirley Hall to report progress.

Mrs. Shirley had given orders that he was to be admitted whenever he came. Both Amy and Dora were present when Herbert Lyon entered the drawing-room.

"What! have you gained some news already?" asked Mrs. Shirley breathlessly, as she motioned him to a seat.

"I have ascertained where Mr. Shirley spent the time between leaving the "Blue Boar" and going to the railway-station," he replied, proceeding to relate the incident of the "To Let" card, and his subsequent conversation with Mrs. Ludley.

"Do you know any person answering to this description?" he asked, after describing Mrs. Macfarren's personal appearance to eager listeners. "Any one likely to exert great influence over Mr. Shirley?"

"Indeed, I do not," said Mrs. Shirley, after ransacking her memory in vain. "An elderly woman with a deep voice and thick, black eyebrows? I am quite certain that she is unknown to me."

"Yet she was the writer of that letter to Mr. Shirley," continued Herbert Lyon, "and it was after a long interview with her that he left his home."

"The affair grows more mysterious than ever," said Mrs. Shirley sorrowfully. "Who can this woman be? I thought my son's life was as an open book to me, that we had no secrets from each other."

"At any rate, my discovery does away to a great extent with the theory of foul play," responded Lyon. "I feel convinced that Mr. Shirley still lives, that it was entirely owing to this woman and her representations he went away in so strange a manner."

"Yet what could she have said to induce or compel him to take such a step?" asked Amy, earnestly. "Mr. Lyon, we have such implicit trust in you. What must be done next?"

"I shall go back to town to-morrow," he said. "There is little, if anything, more of importance to be gleaned at Barminster, Miss Winsome. The next thing is to discover either Mrs. Macfarren, or, better still, Mr. Shirley himself. In all probability, London contains them both at this moment."

"But you—you would not imply that my son has *eloped* with that dreadful woman!" said Mrs. Shirley in a tone that made even Amy smile.

"By no means," he replied. "Mrs. Macfarren's advanced years and lack of personal attractions render that highly improbable. Her influence over him must be of a very different nature."

"I cannot understand her supposed ascendancy over him at all," said Mrs. Shirley, rising and ringing the bell for tea to be brought in. "I am very grateful to you, though, Mr. Lyon, for bringing this fresh fact to light so quickly. You will have some tea before you go? I shall take no denial this time."

It was a graceful concession on her part to one so much lower in the social scale.

Herbert Lyon felt this, and expressed his willingness to stay. Only to be in the same room with Dora Winsome offered him exquisite pleasure—a pleasure he could not define.

For a self-educated man, Herbert Lyon was singularly well read and well informed, with a natural ease and refinement of manner that served him instead of acquired training. Brought up among strangers who cared little or nothing for him, without either father or mother, turned adrift at an early age to earn his own livelihood, Herbert Lyon had made his way to the front by sheer talent and force of character. Yet he did not presume upon this fact, or bring it prominently forward.

Sitting there amidst those graceful, high-bred women he was guilty of no solecisms. His manner was perfectly natural and unembarrassed, just because he lacked all pretension and self-consciousness.

Amy listened eagerly as he related some incidents which had come under his notice as a detective, of missing people restored to their friends long after all hope had been abandoned. She understood and appreciated the kindly motive that prompted him in so doing.

Dora was very quiet. When she joined in the conversation she seemed to take a perverse delight in confuting Herbert Lyon, taking the opposite side, compelling him to defend his own statements—half laughingly, half in earnest.

Presently, to her intense mortification, he turned away from her without any show of resentment, as he might have turned from a fractious, spoiled child, and addressed himself almost exclusively to Amy and Mrs. Shirley. He was evidently not a man to be trampled upon with impunity.

Dora, usually so indifferent to masculine attention, could have cried with anger. When compelled to address her, Lyon's remarks were courteous but very brief.

Tea over, Mrs. Shirley requested the girls to show him the grounds before he left. She wished to pay every attention to this clever, capable young man, who had pledged himself, if possible, to discover her missing son. Dora and Amy went accordingly.

"Allow me to reach them for you," said Herbert Lyon, as Dora stood on tip-toe to gather some willow catkins. "They grow rather high."

"Thanks, but I need not trouble you," she replied, coldly.

At that moment the bough she was grasping sprang up and swung provokingly just out of reach. With a little smile on his dark handsome face, Herbert Lyon drew it down again; while Dora, with a sense of having somehow been defeated, stripped off the smaller branches.

"Thank you," she said, almost humbly, permitting him to walk beside her during the remainder of their stroll.

That night, in the privacy of her own room Dora indulged in a fit of passionate weeping. "It is too dreadful!" she sobbed. "I have only seen him twice, and—and I believe that I am in love with him—a detective! I must, I *will* conquer this infatuation! Oh, why did he ever come here? Was it to punish me for laughing at love—for refusing to believe in it? I never felt like this before. It seems as if, were he to command me to do anything, I must needs obey, however reluctantly. Yes, I love him; but a detective! Why, I am in a worse plight than Amy herself!"

CHAPTER III.

"BREAKFAST is ready, Dad."

"All right, Pearl, my lass. am quite ready for it."

John Desmond, putting aside the box he was carving in the back kitchen, came into the front room, a pleasant compound of sitting-room and kitchen, and took his seat at the round table, spread in readiness for breakfast.

Unfastening the door for the first time that morning, Pearl Desmond opened it, to find the milk-can in one corner, and Jinks, the family cat, sitting beside it, waiting to be admitted.

"You're a nice animal, aren't you? a-skylarkin' over the tiles all night, and coming home with the milk in the morning," demanded John, stroking the cat's soft fur as she sidled up to him. "That's going it with a vengeance; give her a saucer of milk, Pearl. Is Mr. Blank stirring yet?"

"I have called him," was the reply; "he will be down directly. I can hear him moving about overhead."

John Desmond was a tall, stalwart man of sixty-seven, with white hair, cheery, twinkling blue eyes, and a ruddy complexion. For the last seven years he had filled the important post of clerk and pew-opener at St. Wilfred's, a church situated in one of the busiest parts of the city.

The clerk's cottage adjoined the church, and both, in course of time, had become so hemmed in and surrounded on all sides by offices and warehouses that for a stranger to reach St. Wilfred's on Sunday was almost as difficult as to get out of the maze at Hampton Court without knowing the clue. As a rule, the curious stranger arrived late for the service; but there was always ample room for him when he got there.

The average congregation consisted of eight or ten old women, with an eye to the charities distributed several times a year, and a few caretakers and their families. The choir was represented by a few giggling, unruly boys. No one had ever seen St. Wilfred's crowded.

This valuable sinecure was worth about seven hundred a year to the vicar. During the week the church was left chiefly to John Desmond's care. He and his daughter Pearl kept it aired and dusted, and in readiness for weddings or christenings whenever they occurred.

It was a strange transition to leave the roar of the busy thoroughfare, to go up one long narrow lane and down another in order to come suddenly upon St. Wilfred's standing in its deserted graveyard, full of quaint tombstones, and the clerk's cottage adjoining, with its old-fashioned garden in front, always making a brave show of flowers in spring and summer-time. The echoes from the outer world only served to intensify the stillness here. It was a bit of old rustic life set down in the very heart of busy modern London.

"Mr. Blank seems to be getting better rapidly, Pearl," said John, spreading his handkerchief over his knees, and buttering a roll. "It was a lucky thing I found him as I did that night, otherwise he'd have been dead before morning."

Pearl Desmond shuddered involuntarily. She was a tall, handsome girl of two-and-twenty, with large liquid hazel eyes, a clear creamy complexion, and glorious masses of red-brown hair coiled round a well-shaped, firmly-poised head.

Pearl's life had, thus far, been a very lonely one. With instincts and desires superior to her class, of a reserved, undemonstrative nature, she had failed to make any acquaintances among the caretakers and small tradespeople, who formed her only neighbours.

Not that Pearl was proud; only she felt the lack of common sympathies between herself and these people.

Books were her most congenial companions. They helped to soothe the aching sense of loneliness, from which the girl often suffered. When she was not busy with her household duties, or doing fine needlework for the shops, Pearl was generally to be found reading, and in this way her mind had become well-stored.

"Yes, he is much better," she replied, in answer to her father's remark, "but, as you say, it was a narrow escape. Providence led you to the church that night, dad, to find him lying there on the steps."

"As I sat here by the fire," continued John Desmond, "it came into my mind all of a sudden that it was a foggy night, and I had left some of the church windows open. Just as I was unlocking the church door to go in I sees Mr. Blank lying there on the lowest step in his shirt sleeves, bleeding and unconscious.

"The villains that had robbed him had taken his coat and vest, as well as his watch, purse, rings, and pocket-book, leaving him there to die of cold and exposure.

"Well, I hurried back, as you know, and fetched you, Pearl, since you were not likely to screech out or faint at the sight of blood, and between us we got Mr. Blank into the house and on to a bed."

"Then I went for a doctor," said Pearl.

"Exactly. He said Mr. Blank had been attacked from behind, and his head badly injured with a blunt instrument. That was six weeks ago. Now Mr. Blank is recovering, thanks in a great measure to your skilful nursing, Pearl; but the strange thing is he has completely lost his memory. He cannot tell us who he is, or where he came from.

"The doctor declares him to be perfectly sane, only the injury to his head, and the fever that ensued, has destroyed his memory. Nothing but a sudden shock, or being brought suddenly face to face with something or somebody connected with his past life will ever restore it.

"It's a queer state of things for him, poor young man. How he wandered into this secluded spot in such a foggy night I can't imagine.

"He doesn't even remember his own name. Consequently, we have christened him Mr. Blank. The next question is, what's to be done with him, now that he is getting better? He can't stop here for ever!"

"Hush, dad! he is coming," said Pearl, the warm colour surging into her clear cheek at the sound of a footstep on the stairs. "For the present he must remain here."

"Good morning, Miss Desmond."

A young man had entered the cosy little kitchen, a tall young man with dreamy, handsome grey eyes, a face still pallid from recent illness, a drooping moustache, and soft, wavy brown hair pushed back from his broad, white brow.

"Good morning, Mr. Blank," said Pearl, placing a chair for him at the table and pouring out his coffee; then producing from the oven, where they had been put to keep warm, two nicely poached eggs reposing on a slice of buttered toast.

"This lovely weather ought to hasten your recovery."

"Oh, yes, I am much better, thanks to your kindness," he replied, in low, deep, musical tones, passing his hand wearily across his forehead as he spoke. "If only ——"

"Eat your breakfast now, or it will get cold," interposed Pearl, persuasively, bending over him as if he were a child who needed her utmost care and devotion. She dreaded these abortive efforts of his to recall the past. They invariably ended in mental distress and a severe headache.

The very helplessness of this man, who had become an inmate of the cottage under such strange circumstances, had tended to arouse Pearl's sympathy and interest.

During his long illness her tender, womanly ministrations had been freely lavished upon him, and now that he was recovering the peculiar affliction under which he still laboured, namely, his total loss of memory, served to deepen the interest he had aroused in her breast.

Mr. Blank, as they called him, was beyond doubt a gentleman. His refinement of voice and manners, and the clothes he wore, all went to prove his superior station.

His exact identity, however, they could not ascertain, neither was he capable of revealing it at present, while the men who had attacked and robbed him, had carried off everything likely to afford information.

Perhaps the very fact of his handsome face, his gentle birth and breeding, tended to deepen Pearl's liking for her patient, to render him doubly attractive to one who appreciated such accidents.

Unconsciously, the girl's heart had gone out of her keeping. She was in love for the first time in her life, and love to one of her intense, ardent nature, must mean either extreme joy or woe.

Only to wait upon this stranger, to minister to all his requirements, afforded her a subtle bliss she dared not define lest she should lose it.

Any allusion to his departure filled her with pain. What, she dimly wondered, would life seem like without him? How had she ever been able to endure existence until he came to render it so vaguely happy—so full of sweet, palpitating hopes and fears?

She refused to look forward to a time when he would be no longer at the cottage.

"I'll smoke a pipe, if you've no objection, Mr. Blank," said John Desmond, when breakfast was over, and Pearl, looking fresh and charming in her neat holland dress, lace-edged apron, and knot of blue ribbon, had cleared the table.

"Certainly not," said the young man, rising and walking restlessly to and fro the room; "but my name is not Blank. At least——"

"Are you going to help dad sow the seeds this morning?" asked Pearl, in order to to divert his thoughts.

"Yes, that is if he requires any help," was the reply, in a gentle tone. Mr. Blank always spoke gently to Pearl. Her mere presence seemed to have a soothing effect upon him. He looked to her instinctively for all he required. "By the bye," pausing in front of it, "what a peculiar cupboard. I wonder I hadn't noticed it before. It's the very shape of a coffin!"

"Right you are," assented John Desmond with a laugh, glancing at the cupboard in question, which stood in one corner of the kitchen, well stored with preserves, and cordials, and crockery. "It *is* a coffin. Twenty years ago, when I was travelling with a gentleman in foreign parts, I was taken suddenly ill, and, to all appearances, died. They bory very quickly out there. My coffin was ready in a few hours, and I was about to be placed in it and screwed down when somebody noticed a slight movement of my lips. They tried every means to restore animation, and succeeded. I soon got well after that, but I would not part with my coffin. I brought it home with me, and had it fitted up with shelves, and the lid hung on hinges, to serve as a door. Makes a capital cupboard, doesn't it? I give it a fresh coating of varnish once a year. If it has never yet held a body, there are always plenty of good spirits to be found inside it."

"A droll idea on your part," said the young man, regarding the unique cupboard with a smile. Then turning away from it, he approached Pearl, who was in the act of filling the kettle from a large heavy can.

"Allow me to do that for you," he said, taking the can ere she could remonstrate against such a proceeding. "It is much too heavy for you to lift."

"I am accustomed to hard work," replied the girl with a smile. "I was born to it, you see, and it comes so much the easier on that account."

"You were meant for better things," he whispered, gently. "At any rate, I have proved you to be the very pearl of good nurses!"

The swift colour mantled in her face as he spoke. Praise from him was doubly, trebly sweet.

Between them the young people contrived to overfill the kettle, and spill a good deal of water on the clean hearth.

John Desmond regarded them intently from beneath his bushy white brows, then pushed his chair back impatiently, and went into the back kitchen to resume his wood-carving.

"I wish I had never brought the fellow here!" he muttered, angrily. "I wish I had had him taken straight away to the hospital at once. Pearl's getting a deal too fond of him, and he of her. I won't have my girl's peace of mind destroyed by a man who comes from nobody knows where! Lost his memory, indeed! a very convenient loss, I shouldn't wonder. There's a great deal, very likely, that he'd much rather not remember. I must get rid of him; but how? that's the thing. Every time I speak of his going, Pearl turns white, and begs for him to be allowed to stop a little longer. *He* doesn't seem to trouble himself about such a trifle as free board and lodgin'. Takes it all as a matter of course! I'll put it to the vicar, that I will, and hear what he has to say. He may see some way out of the difficulty. I'm blest if I can, though!"

Presently John Desmond went out to dust

and open the church in readiness for a christening.

Pearl took her sewing and sat down by the window, close to the pots of spring blossoms that rendered it bright and country-like.

Mr. Blank resumed his restless walking to and fro the room.

"Is anything the matter?" she inquired, gently, at length, her eyes full of outspoken, wistful love as they rested upon him.

"No—yes. I cannot tell," he rejoined, confusedly. "There is something I would fain recall; but it eludes me. I cannot sleep or rest by reason of it! Faces float before me in the night, and vanish ere I can recognise them. Shadowy ideas haunt me, and flit away ere I can grasp their meaning! All is pain and confusion!"

A perplexed tortured expression rested upon his handsome young face as he spoke that made Pearl's heart ache.

Rising from her seat, she approached him, and laid one firm, white hand timidly upon his breast.

"You must not permit these visions to trouble you—to distress you," she said, soothingly. "By and by the clouds will clear away, and all that now seems dark and indistinct to you will vanish. Until then be content to remain quietly here with us. Our home is a very humble one, but you are so welcome to share it!"

"That is another difficulty," he replied, but in a calmer tone. "I ought not to remain here, eating the bread of idleness, accepting all the kindness you offer. I had money, surely; but they—they took it from me, I think. They struck me down!"

"Yes, yes; I know," she interposed; "but never mind that now. If you are so desirous to do something, I think I could obtain some copying for you, to be done at home. You write a good, bold hand; at least, I will try. And, if I succeed, you will feel more satisfied? you will talk no more of leaving us?"

"No. Where else should I go?" he asked, earnestly. "Who would care for me as you have done, Pearl? I could not endure to be parted from you! Your presence soothes and comforts me; it dispels the shadows which haunt me at other times! Life without you would be unendurable!"

This open acknowledgment of his need of her thrilled the girl with keenest joy.

Another moment, and, bending over her, he had imprinted a kiss upon her brow. It was the first time that any man, save her father, had ever kissed her. She trembled from head to foot as she shrank a little away from him.

"Pearl, my darling! you are not angry with me?" he said, entreatingly. "It was my love for you that prompted the caress. Promise that you will never forsake me?"

"I promise," she replied, solemnly, as her head drooped upon his breast. "As long as you need me I will never abandon you. I can know no greater happiness than to serve you unremittingly, to feel that I am, to some extent, necessary to you!"

When John Desmond returned, having had his interview with the vicar, and, Mr. Blank being out of the way, mentioned the clergyman's proposal to send him to the workhouse to Pearl, the old clerk, found that he had unwittingly raised a storm. He hardly recognised Pearl in the indignant, resolute woman who confronted him, and opposed his project with flashing eyes.

"Father, if you send him there I shall go as well to look after him!" she exclaimed, vehemently. "The workhouse! I did not think you were so hard-hearted. Only let him stay here!" her voice sinking to entreaty, "and I will work hard to support him. He shall not be a burden to you!"

"Tut, tut! nonsense, child, it isn't that!" replied John. "I don't grudge him house-room, but I do grudge him your love, and that he is stealing from me!"

"Oh, father!"

"Oh, father, indeed! If you don't love him in return why should you take so much interest in a perfect stranger? Confound the fellow, I say!"

"Let him remain a little longer to see if his memory returns?"

"A nice thing, especially if he should wake up some fine morning to recollect that he has got a wife and family waiting for him somewhere. Well, take your own way—you generally get it in the end; but I'm afraid there'll be trouble come of it this time, my lass!"

Two months slipped quickly away. Spring was gliding into summer, and still Mr. Blank continued to reside at the clerk's cottage, earning a little money by copying legal documents, his memory still in the same impaired condition which rendered Pearl's sympathy and aid so indispensable to him. He seldom went out alone, since he had little or no knowledge of that part of London, and during his absence, Pearl was in a constant state of nervous agitation lest some fresh harm should befall him. He was perfectly sane, only his total loss of memory rendered him different to other men.

One day Mr. Blank sallied out alone, however, in the morning to return some documents to the law-stationer, who had entrusted them to him for the purpose of being copied; and who lived not far from St. Wilfred's.

He was on his way home again, when an elderly woman with harsh, strongly-marked features, thick, black eyebrows, and keen piercing, grey eyes, an elderly woman dressed in good, but plain, attire, caught sight of the young man as she emerged from the bank where she had been transacting business.

Mr. Blank passed on without having observed her. She followed him at a distance, with the glance of a vulture scenting its prey.

"So, at last I have come across you?" she reflected, exultantly. "You can hide yourself from me no longer."

So intent was she in keeping him in sight, that she ran up against another young man, going in the opposite direction, a tall, dark-eyed, clean-shaven individual, with firm resolute lips.

He started slightly, as she went on with a muttered apology, then turned round, and followed her without attracting her attention.

On went the three, the woman profoundly unconscious that she, in turn, was being watched.

The narrow pavement was crowded with people, yet she never lost sight of Mr. Blank, and the young man with the dark eyes never lost sight of her.

Presently Mr. Blank turned down the lane leading to the clerk's cottage, the other two still after him.

It was difficult in this comparatively quiet spot to avoid detection. The woman slackened her pace, and, peering round the corner of the lane, watched Mr. Blank enter the clerk's cottage.

Then she produced a note book, glanced up to discover the name of this particular spot, and made an entry in it.

When she turned round to retrace her steps, the tall, dark young man was nowhere to be seen.

A convenient doorway had swallowed him up. He emerged from it, however, and, by way of compliment, followed her home all the way to Islington, riding on the knife-board of the omnibus which held the grim, elderly female as an inside passenger.

Having made up his mind that this woman was Mrs. MacFarren, and Mr. Blank Frederick Shirley, Herbert Lyon made his way to the Hall and related everything to Mrs. Shirley.

"If what you say is true, he must indeed, be mad," that lady remarked, vehemently, "or he *could* not act thus basely. My poor unhappy boy, what can have happened to unseat his reason? These people are combining for some purpose against him; but their evil designs shall be defeated. Mr. Lyon, you will take me to him at once? The plot they are maturing shall be exposed and punished at any cost."

"I do not think there is any conspiracy on the part of the clerk and his daughter," said Herbert Lyon, promptly. "The old man seemed most reluctant to sanction the marriage. Besides, Mr. Shirley had even succeeded in hiding himself from Mrs. Macfarren. She was on his track when she ran up against me that day in the City."

"I shall insist upon a complete explanation from my son, if he is capable of giving it," said Mrs. Shirley, "when we meet."

"The charwoman alluded to some injury received by Mr. Shirley at the hands of footpads," continued Herbert Lyon. "This may account for his impaired mental condition."

"And you have no idea who and what that dreadful woman, calling herself Macfarren, can be?" asked Mrs. Shirley, "or how my son became acquainted with these people in the City?"

"Not at present," was the reply, "but I hope to do so ere long."

"I am beyond measure grateful to you for what you have already done," said Mrs. Shirley, "although the information obtained is of a very painful nature. Only to know my son still lives, however, has relieved my mind of a terrible fear. You will stay at Shirley Hall to night, Mr. Lyon, and to-morrow I shall accompany you back to town by an early train."

"You will take me with you?" interposed Amy, imploringly. "I cannot stay behind!" And Mrs. Shirley yielded a somewhat reluctant assent.

She feared the result of a first interview with the man she loved, under such altered conditions, upon the girl's shattered nerves, but Amy was bent on going. She had not lost faith in her lover, despite his supposed liking for Pearl Desmond, and his intention of making this commonplace girl his wife. Only a disordered intellect, she told herself, could have led up to such a state of affairs. His heart was, and had always been, hers, and hers alone. To rescue him from the bad hands into which he had by some means fallen constituted Amy's one desire.

Herbert Lyon rose early the next morning. The sunlight streaming into his room, the song of birds, aroused him. Going to his window he drank in the glorious prospect of hill and dale and leafy wood, all steeped in fresh morning sunshine, with the delight of one accustomed only, as a rule, to bricks and mortar. A longing to explore the grounds took possession of him. Dressing himself, he went downstairs and out of doors. The sweet, solemn stillness of early morn rested upon everything, as if, during the night, earth had been holding mystic communion with Heaven; the dew lay thick upon the grass and flowers.

Herbert Lyon, who fully appreciated country surroundings, had just stooped to inhale the fragrance arising from a bed of lilies, when Dora Winsome came round the corner of the house towards him, her hands full of fresh-gathered flowers.

She started slightly on perceiving him, and dropped some of her flowers. He hastened to pick them up for her.

"You are an early riser, Mr. Lyon," she remarked, as they walked along side by side, between the scented hedges of the rose-alley.

"I should lose so much by remaining in bed, and neglecting to make the most of this peep into paradise," he replied, half laughingly. "It is not often that such a treat is afforded me."

"You would find the paradise very dull, I am afraid, if you were compelled to live in it always," said Dora, saucily. "The skies are not always blue, you know, or the flowers in bloom."

Dora, with her golden brown hair and deep blue eyes glancing out from beneath a shady garden hat was not unlike a flower herself. At least, so thought Herbert Lyon. If only

that walk by her side could have been indefinitely prolonged!

She was in a gentler and more sympathetic mood this morning. She drew Herbert Lyon out respecting his own history. He never quite knew how it came about; but, presently, he found himself describing to her his lonely, friendless, unhappy boyhood, his struggling youth, and the various events that had gone to make up his career.

Dora listened intently, a little flush upon her fair cheek. She felt proud, actually proud, of this man who had fought his way up from the ranks unaided.

His natural good-breeding and refinement rendered it difficult to keep steadily in mind the fact that he was only a detective.

"So you see, my origin was a very humble one, Miss Winsome," he said, in conclusion.

"What does that matter?" she said, impassively, a little astonished at her own boldness. "'The rank is but the guinea's stamp. A man's a man for a' that.'"

"Do you think so?" he asked, earnestly.

And, as their eyes met, their mutual secret stood revealed.

CHAPTER IV.

Pearl Desmond stood in front of the glass in her little room, trying on a simple white dress, that fitted her admirably, displaying the clear, creamy skin and superb form to great advantage.

There was a glad light in the girl's glorious brown eyes as she wound the heavy coils of tawny, golden-brown hair around her shapely head.

On the bed lay a wreath of orange blossoms, and a plain tulle veil. It was Pearl Desmond's wedding-day.

She had no girl friends to assist her with her bridal toilette, yet she was too happy to regret their absence.

The man she loved, the man who constituted her world, was about to become her husband, and she had nothing on earth left to wish for.

She even wondered a little in sweet sincerity and gratitude why such a crown of joy should have fallen to her share. In less than an hour hence he would have become hers, to love and cherish and tend with fondest solicitude so long as life should last.

It was characteristic of Pearl's generous, unselfish nature that, in marrying, she thought rather *of giving* devotion and willing service than of receiving it.

Upon her must needs fall the burden, the responsibility of life, since her husband elect laboured under such a strange mental affection, and she gladly accepted it. Nay, even thought herself favoured to receive it.

Mr. Blank had asked her to be his wife some three weeks ago, and John Desmond, in response to Pearl's entreaties, had yielded a grudging consent to their union.

The young man's memory was still a blank. His past life seemed completely blotted out, save for dim chaotic, fragmentary recollections, which only tended to sadden and depress him.

Pearl's strong, calm helpful nature, her love and devotion, had become indispensable to him. Yet he had not thought of asking her to marry him until a trifling incident suggested the idea to him.

Until then he had accepted her constant presence, her unwearying care, as a matter of course.

Coming home unexpectedly one day, he had overheard a remark made by Pearl's aunt—a loquacious, gossiping, widow woman, who had called in to see her niece.

"Pearl, my dear, people will begin to talk if that young man stays here much longer with you waiting on him hand and foot. What your father can be thinking of to allow it, I don't know."

"Oh, hush, aunt," whispered Pearl in an agony of shame as she perceived Mr. Blank standing by the open door. "You don't understand."

"Of course not; it's the young people that have got all the wisdom now-a-days!" aunt had said tartly, rising and preparing to depart.

Mr. Blank made no allusion to her remark at the time, but, later on, when Pearl and he were together, he reverted to it.

"You have only to bid me go," he said, gently, "and dreary as my life must needs be apart from you, I will do so."

Pearl bowed her head to hide the blinding tears.

"I would have you remain here—always," she replied, brokenly. "Forget those heedless words, and do not allow them to trouble you. If you can be content to remain in this poor place, which has seemed so different since you came, I ask you not to leave it."

He regarded her in silence for a moment, then knelt down beside her chair.

"Pearl," he said, earnestly, "my gentle, untiring nurse and companion, do you love me well enough to be my wife? It is the only reward I can offer you, if I dare call it by that name. I know there is something wanting about me, something that sets me apart from other men. Can you overlook this deficiency, and render my life happier by giving yourself wholly to me? Pearl, is it possible that you love me, and me only—afflicted as I am?"

"You are all in all to me," she had responded. "I ask no happier fate than to share your life."

And thus the wedding had been arranged, much to John Desmond's annoyance. His entire ignorance of Mr. Blank's antecedents rendered him suspicious of the young man, whereas Pearl's love gave her unbounded faith in him.

Having donned her wedding dress, she ran downstairs to put the finishing touches to the toilets of father and bridegroom; to adjust the pin in John Desmond's stiff white collar, and to arrange a flower in Mr. Blank's buttonhole with fingers that lingered lovingly over their task.

The bridal ceremony was to be of the simplest description. The three principals would merely cross over from the clerk's cottage to the church, where the clergyman and the female pew-opener awaited them, in readiness to proceed with the marriage service.

Pearl, glancing earnestly at her lover, noticed that he seemed unusually *distrait* and self-absorbed, as if he were making a painful mental effort to recall some vanished memory. She dreaded these moods for him, and always strove to change them.

"We have got sunshine on our wedding-day," she said brightly, "and that is a good omen."

He paused in his restless pacing to and fro, and passed his hand wearily across his forehead.

"Our wedding-day!" he repeated absently. "It seems to me, Amy, to have been long deferred. Surely——"

"Not Amy, but Pearl," she corrected, with a sudden sharp fear piercing her heart. He had never mentioned that name before; "and we have only been engaged three weeks?"

He made no reply, but resumed that restless pacing. Pearl, shaking off a vague sense of depression, the result of his words, went upstairs to assume her bridal wreath and veil. In less than another half hour they would have become man and wife.

Pearl Desmond, it is your wedding-day, yet you little dream what guests an inexorable destiny is speeding towards you, or how soon they will cross your threshold! The happiness of two devoted women trembles in the balance. Half-an-hour will suffice to weigh the scale down on one side or the other, and to decide the joy or misery of a lifetime.

Her veil arranged over the coils of burnished hair, entwined with orange blossoms, Pearl went, half shyly, downstairs. John Desmond, dressed in Sunday go-to-meeting attire, took his daughter in his arms, and kissed her fondly.

"My dear girl, I trust that you'll be as happy in your new life as in the old one!" said the clerk, with unwonted emotion.

A little smile wreathed Pearl's lips. The old life! why, it would not bear comparison with the radiant happiness, the sunlit hopes that were hers now. Until this stranger arrived to arouse her love from its long slumber, she had merely existed, she had not lived, in the fullest sense of the word.

"Time for us to be starting," said John Desmond, glancing impatiently from the clock to the bridegroom who had fallen into another reverie. "Well, of all the——"

A loud imperative knock at the front door cut short his remark. Stepping forward, John Desmond flung it wide open. Mrs. Shirley, Agnes Winsome, and Herbert Lyon stood upon the threshold.

"We are too late!" exclaimed Mrs. Shirley, in despairing accents, as she caught sight of Pearl Desmond in her bridal attire, standing beside the son she had never hoped to behold in life again.

"No, just in time," replied Herbert Lyon, calmly.

"Fred, my dear boy" cried Mrs. Shirley, advancing towards him, regardless of the others present. "I have found you at last! Is it possible that you do not recognise me—your mother?"

Fred Shirley, otherwise Mr. Blank, regarded her fixedly for a moment; then his eyes wandered from her face to that of Amy Winsome, who had drawn closer to him. Perfect silence reigned throughout the small room.

"Fred, dear Fred!" murmured Amy, grasping his hand.

At the sound of her voice he started. A convulsive movement shook him from head to foot.

"Mother—Amy!" he said, hoarsely. "You here! Oh, Heaven, I remember! It is all flooding back upon me—the departure from home—the attack—the——Oh my head, my head!"

The sudden inrush of thought and memory, the association of ideas, at being thus brought face to face with those dearest to him, proved too much for Fred Shirley's endurance. He swayed and fell forward unconscious at Amy Winsome's feet.

They raised him on to a sofa, and applied restoratives, Herbert Lyon sending for a doctor. In the confusion no one, save her father, had noticed Pearl Desmond. She stood there white, rigid, motionless, in her bridal attire. John Desmond's eyes never wandered from her anguished face.

"My girl, my poor girl!" he murmured compassionately, "I feared that nothing but sorrow would come of this. Madam," turning sharply round and addressing Mrs. Shirley, "you admit that young man to be your son?"

"I do," replied Mrs Shirley, with a touch of hauteur, as she bent over the prostrate form, "and I am at a loss to know by what means he became an inmate of your cottage."

"I wish to Heaven he had never entered it to bring sorrow to me and mine," exclaimed the clerk, vehemently. "My daughter, madam, is as dear to me as your son is to you. That young lady," pointing to Amy Winsome, "is—is she his sister?"

"No," said Mrs. Shirley. "My son was about to be married to her when he disappeared. They are still engaged."

"Listen to me, ma'am, please," said John Desmond, with a rude eloquence that compelled attention. "Three months ago I found your son lying on the church steps one dark night, bleeding and senseless. He had been robbed and badly injured. I had him brought in here—stranger as he was—and my daughter, Pearl, nursed him day and night till he recovered. Then the doctor declared his memory was completely gone, that only a sudden shock could restore it. Your son had forgotten even his own name, and we called him Mr. Blank. I let him go on here, since he had no place

else to go to, and no friends. He made a bit of money now and again by doing copying for the law stationers. Well, in time, the young people got fond of each other, as young people will. Mr. Shirley asked my daughter to marry him, and she consented, although I was against it from the first. This should have been their wedding day. But for your arrival they would have been man and wife ere now. Ma'am, you have got your son back again, but my daughter's happiness is ruined. I wish he had died ere I let him into my house to work so much harm. He won't want to marry her now that his memory's returned, although *she* was willing enough to take him when there seemed little chance of his ever getting any better. Pearl, my poor lass, go upstairs and take off those things. It breaks my heart to see you in them!"

Womanly sympathy gaining the victory over caste prejudice, Mrs. Shirley approached Pearl, and took the girl's cold hand in her own. John Desmond's impassioned words had not been without their effect upon her.

"My poor girl!" she said, gently, "your father's explanation has enabled me to view this sad affair from a different standpoint. I know now how much I am indebted to you both for your care of my son. Believe me, no one regrets your disappointed hopes and painful position more than myself. Yet circumstances, rather than individuals, are accountable for what has occurred. Had my son been in the full possession of his mental faculties, he would not have acted so strangely in asking you to become his wife, ignoring all previously contracted ties. He would have been the first to shrink from anything approaching dishonourable conduct. I feel convinced that you will be ready to admit this—to pardon the pain he has unwittingly inflicted upon you!"

"I do not blame him" said Pearl, her burning, tearless eyes fastened upon Amy Winsome, who hung over the couch upon which Fred Shirley lay.

To Amy now belonged the privilege of caring for him. He was hers, and hers alone. Pearl had no longer any claim upon him. He had passed out of her life altogether.

"He never attempted to deceive me—there is nothing to forgive!" she continued. Then turning to John Desmond, moaned, "Take me away! Oh! father, take me away!"

Together the two quitted the room.

Several hours elapsed ere Fred Shirley recovered consciousness. The doctor who had been called in was the same who had attended him during his previous illness.

Such a remarkable case of lapsed memory, rare in the annals of medical lore, had interested him deeply at the time; and this strange sequel to it, this sudden return of the lost faculty, aroused his professional interest afresh.

Thanks to his efforts, Fred Shirley awoke from that death-like trance, weak as a child, but otherwise unharmed by the ordeal through which he had passed. He recognised Mrs. Shirley and Amy, he evinced a perfect knowledge of past events. His memory had returned to him unimpaired, yet with it came an overwhelming rush of sorrow and regret.

In his enfeebled condition the doctor forbade all excitement or prolonged conversation. As soon as possible he was removed in a carriage from John Desmond's cottage to the hotel at which Mrs. Shirley stayed.

Before quitting it he made an earnest request to be allowed to see Pearl, to speak to her, but she had refused to come forward.

"Tell him that I am not angry or resentful," she said, "by reason of what has happened—that he was not to blame, but of my own will I shall never look upon his face again!"

The message distressed Fred Shirley to an extent that rendered his devoted little *fiancée* somewhat jealous and unhappy.

By the next day Fred had so far recovered that he was capable of sitting up in an easy chair. Talk he would; it was impossible to control his restless desire to learn all that had transpired since he quitted Barminster.

A deep, settled sadness seemed to oppress his formerly glad, sunny nature—a sadness which the presence of Mrs. Shirley and Amy failed to dispel.

"Fred, my dear boy, what induced you to disappear in the first instance—to quit your home without a word of warning?" asked his mother, tenderly. "That woman at Barminster, with whom you held a long interview before going away; what is the secret of her influence over you? Be frank with me, I implore you!"

"I left all that I most loved and valued behind," he replied, with averted face, "upon making the bitter, overwhelming discovery that I have no right to them, that, from my birth, I had been an unconscious impostor, usurping the place, the privileges, that belonged to another. The knowledge maddened me, and I fled!"

Mrs. Shirley regarded him in all amazement. Could it be that his mind was still unhinged?

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I mean that I am *not your son!*" he went on. "The woman who wrote requesting an interview informed me to this effect. At first I refused to believe it, but facts are stubborn things, and she produced evidence which it was impossible to controvert. My name is not Shirley, but Edward Mortimer. I am her sister's child, and she, with a fiendish desire to be avenged upon you for having married Frank Shirley—whose mistress she had formerly been—contrived to exchange your child for that of her sister, which had been entrusted to her soon after birth. Now it is easy to understand why I bear so little resemblance either to you or my *soi-disant* father. I was palmed off upon you by an adventuress!"

Poor Mrs. Shirley sat speechless and motionless. His words, so calmly uttered, free from any trace of insanity, had stricken her to the heart.

Amy crept up and threw a loving arm around her.

"It cannot be!" she exclaimed. "Why, I was never separated from you. I must needs have detected such a plot to deprive me of my child, to substitute another for it, had she attempted to carry it out!"

"Nevertheless it was done," he insisted. "The woman, my aunt, described each detail to me minutely, with a kind of fiendish exultation in the success of her own evil design. The nurse who attended you in your confinement was, it appears, a creature of hers, paid to carry out her instructions. During the confusion and distress that followed upon your dangerous illness, when the child was left for awhile entirely to her care, she contrived to effect the exchange. Mr. Shirley's heir was sent to London and entrusted to strangers, under an assumed name, which she refused to reveal. I—her sister's child—grew up at the Hall, believing myself to be your son, enjoying all the privileges which should have been his. Can you wonder that, when the awful truth was revealed to me, I shrank from meeting either you or my affianced wife again?"

A low, sobbing cry escaped Mrs. Shirley's lips—the cry of a tortured soul. She had found this beloved son, as she had always deemed him to be, only to learn that he was the offspring of another woman; that her own child had been taken from her under circumstances which rendered it extremely unlikely that she would ever meet him again. It was hard indeed to realise the bitter truth, to wrest this man from the place he had always held in her heart.

"My child, my son!" she cried, almost fiercely. "What has become of *him?*"

"She declared herself to be ignorant of his present whereabouts," continued Edward Mortimer. "She said he ran away from the people with whom she placed him when he was about twelve years old, and nothing was heard of him afterwards. My parents, she went on to say, emigrated to America, where they subsequently died in great poverty. No desire to promote my welfare induced her to commit this shameful crime, and to reveal it to me after long years of silence. She wished to experience the delight of depriving you of one whom you had always loved and regarded as your son—your own flesh and blood. She would have come to the Hall with her story and proclaimed it there had I not disappeared as I did, thus fulfilling her purpose and saving herself from the consequences of such a revelation."

"You should have returned to the Hall that day, and revealed this terrible story to me," said Mrs. Shirley, "instead of going away without a word. I should not have blamed you or held you responsible for her sin."

"I intended to write to you," he replied, "telling you all, setting Amy free from her engagement, and announcing my intention of searching the world till I had succeeded in discovering your son and reinstating him in the position I had so long usurped. On reaching London, however, I went straight to St. Wilfred's Church in the City. She told me my parents had been married there, and I wished to ascertain if that part of her story was correct. It was late when I reached the church, and in that dark, lonely spot I was attacked from behind, robbed, and severely injured. You know the rest."

"The detective who traced you here succeeded in tracing that woman also," said Mrs. Shirley. "I will go to her myself. If she knows where my son is to be found, I will wring the truth from her lips ere another day has passed!"

CHAPTER V.

She quitted the room as she spoke to send an imperative message to Herbert Lyon, bidding him come to her without delay. Amy lingered behind.

There was an agony of renunciation in Edward Mortimer's dark eyes as they rested upon her. She had remained perfectly silent during his narrative. He was at a loss to know precisely how it had affected her.

"Amy, ere we part, never to meet again," he said, brokenly, "you will absolve me from blame in reference to the past, and the *rôle* I have been made to play? Oh, my little love, I have suffered so much already, and the worst is yet to come, when I face life alone, bereaved of hope—and you!"

The passionate regret in his voice gave her courage to take the initiative.

"Unless you desire it," she began, slowly, "there will be no need for us to part—for our engagement to be cancelled."

"No need!" he repeated, beating down the wild, radiant hope her words had aroused, thrusting it from him. "Amy, surely you understand that I have lost all I once deemed to be mine by right of birth—name, fortune, position. In future I must earn my own living. I am a poor man, the son of obscure, humble parents. Moreover, I have been used as the instrument with which to effect a cruel fraud. In every sense of the word I am a detrimental, the last man in the world that you, with your many advantages, ought to marry. The least I can do is to restore your freedom."

He broke down, and hid his face in his hands as he spoke. Kneeling down beside him, Amy Winsome gently removed them.

"What I have so recently heard," she said, steadily, "has in nowise affected my love for you. Fred—I cannot bring myself as yet to call you by any other name—it is you I love, not your wealth, or your position; they are mere accidents, apart from which you are capable of existing unchanged. It matters nothing to me who your parents were, or whether you are rich or poor. If possible you are even dearer to me now than you were before. I am yours now and always, unless," with a sudden sharp pang of jealousy, "you

have ceased to care for me. In that case only will I accept my freedom."

With a sudden inrush of tumultuous joy Edward Mortimer strained her to his heart.

"My darling, your fidelity has extracted the sting from my misfortunes!" he exclaimed, exultantly. "I can face them manfully now. You have ever held the first place in my heart, Amy. Gratitude and liking alone drew me towards Pearl Desmond. Even when my intellect was clouded I seemed vaguely conscious of this. Poor, noble, generous Pearl! I have done an immense amount of unintentional harm all round. My mother—what am I saying? I mean Mrs. Shirley—will probably raise objections to a marriage between us now."

"I think not," said Amy. "But were she to do so on a point so closely affecting my own happiness I should refuse to yield—to admit her authority."

The lovers' conversation was here interrupted by the arrival of Herbert Lyon. Mrs. Shirley followed the detective into the room.

Edward Mortimer repeated to him the startling disclosure already narrated at Mrs. Shirley's request, thereby giving him the long-desired clue.

The detective fairly started from his seat at the mention of the name of Mortimer.

"And your parents, according to Mrs. Macfarren's statement, both died in America?" he said, addressing the young man.

"Yes; in great poverty."

"Ah, that fact remains to be proved!" continued Herbert Lyon, coolly. Mrs. Macfarren is at present living in Islington under the assumed name of Jones. I am desirous of bringing both you and Mrs. Shirley face to face with her unexpectedly. I have a double purpose to serve in so doing."

"I am willing to accompany you if my presence can in anywise further Mrs. Shirley's desire to discover her long lost son," said Edward Mortimer, "much as I shrink from meeting that woman again."

Mrs. Shirley thanked him with a grateful glance. She had neither the will nor the power to wrest him at once from the place he had so long held in her heart. An hour later the trio started for Islington, Amy electing to remain at the hotel pending their return.

"Mr. Mortimer, you may prove to be a far wealthier man than you imagine, unless Mrs. Macfarren has been unduly lavish in her expenditure," remarked Herbert Lyon, as they went along in the cab.

"What do you mean?" demanded the other, still very sore and sensitive, poor fellow, respecting his undesirable relation. "I would sooner starve, sir, than touch a penny of her ill-gotten wealth!"

"I was alluding," continued Lyon, "not to any property of which Mrs. Macfarren can justly claim the ownership, but to a large sum of money, willed to you ten years ago by your father at his decease, he being under the impression that you were still, and had always been, living under your aunt's roof—an impression which she had taken care to maintain. By means of forged signatures this sum of money, amounting to twenty thousand pounds, legally yours, fell into her hands, and the fraud has only recently been discovered. An American detective requested me to work up the case, and, if possible, to find both aunt and nephew. Thanks to your disclosure of to-day, my task has been rendered an easy one. It is for you to say, Mr. Mortimer, if you will prosecute."

"I hardly know yet," said the young man, wearily. "She may prove willing to disburse some of the money which is in reality mine. At any rate, our knowledge of the crime committed must be held over her as a threat to extort information respecting Frederick Shirley. In that way it may prove of great service. Whatever she knows concerning him she shall be made to reveal. I swear it!"

When the cab stopped in front of the house where Mrs. Jones resided, its occupants got out, and Herbert Lyon rang the bell.

"Mrs. Jones at home?" he asked of the servant-girl, who recognised him again as the young man who had recently called, collecting names for the local directory. "Very good, you need not announce us, we will walk in."

Ere the girl could protest or remonstrate, Herbert Lyon had entered the ground floor parlour, followed by Mrs. Shirley, in a state of deep, yet repressed agitation, and Edward Mortimer. Lyon had kept the latter in the cab until the last moment, lest Mrs. Jones should recognise him from the window of her sitting-room.

A gaunt, elderly, hard-featured woman, dressed in severe black, sprang to her feet at the entry of the unannounced, unexpected visitors, and confronted them defiantly, her knitting still grasped in her hand.

"What is the meaning of this?" she demanded, in deep harsh tones. "Who," pointing to Herbert Lyon, a gleam of frantic terror in her eyes, "are you? I know the others, but——"

"My name is Herbert Lyon," was the quiet reply, "and I am a detective. Mrs. Macfarren, *alias* Mrs. Jones, you stand convicted of two crimes, for which you will be compelled to answer, namely abduction in the first instance, forgery in the second."

Jane Macfarren sank back into a chair, her hard face working convulsively.

"Herbert Lyon," she repeated, "and it has fallen to his share to arrest me; there is some truth in an avenging Providence after all. Well, do your worst," she continued, with a fierce courage born of despair. "I shall ask no mercy at your hands. I feel curious to know how you have succeeded in bringing these things home to me. You must be a promising detective, Mr. Lyon, sure to advance in your profession. Why have you brought my amiable nephew, and Mrs. Shirley of Shirley Hall here with you? Does *he* expect to receive back his fortune, and *she* her son? It is not in my power to realise their expectations. I would not do it if I could."

The woman was furious; her own fierce desire to be avenged upon another woman had brought this ruin upon her. But for that revelation made at Barminster to her nephew, the damning facts, the chain of evidence now encircling her, would have remained for ever undisclosed. One event had led up to another, until the whole of her iniquity stood revealed.

Mrs. Shirley, unable to remain in the background any longer, approached a few steps nearer to Mrs. Macfarren, and addressed that lady with quivering lips.

"What had I ever done to you," she asked, "that you should rob me of my child and substitute another in his stead, thereby causing intense suffering not only to me but to your own nephew, whom I had always regarded as my son, when your sinful act became known?"

"What had you done?" repeated Mrs. Macfarren, sitting there with sinister face and folded arms, frowning darkly at her interrogator. "You married Frank Shirley, you took him away from me. If you had not crossed his path he might have fulfilled his promise, and made me his wife. I had reason enough to hate you, and it is in my nature to do things thoroughly. I hated *his* mother also," pointing to Edward Mortimer, "although she was my own sister.

"I had hoped to marry Luke Mortimer as a last resource. I was good looking in those days, whatever I may be now, and he fancied her instead, a simple, modest girl—a mere baby. They met with adverse fortune, however, and Nina was compelled to leave her infant child in my care, she and her husband going to America. It was then the idea of exchanging the children who were of the same age occurred to me, and I succeeded in carrying it out. Nina died soon after her arrival in America, and her husband married again and became prosperous. He sent sums of money home from time to time in the belief that his boy was still under my care. He left him a sum of money when he died. That, as you are aware, it seems, I appropriated to my own use. Is there any other information you would like to receive?"

"If you have a woman's heart within your breast," said poor Mrs. Shirley, beseechingly, "you will tell me what became of my son. You cannot have lost sight of him completely."

"But I have," rejoined Jane Macfarren, glancing at Herbert Lyon rather than at Mrs. Shirley as she spoke. "You appeal to my pity!—you! who considered my heart when it bled and broke over Frank Shirley's infidelity? He ought to have married me. I came of respectable people. I know nothing regarding your son's fate. I did not keep him with me after gaining possession of him. I placed him with some people living in London, and paid them a small sum for his maintenance, while he was still a boy. He ran away from them eventually, and nothing was ever heard of him after. In all probability," with a diabolical laugh, "he is dead!"

The anguish depicted on Mrs. Shirley's face afforded her exquisite enjoyment—even now.

"The name of these people to whom you entrusted Frederick Shirley?" demanded Edward Mortimer, sternly. "It is in my power, remember, and in that of Mrs. Shirley also, to have you prosecuted upon two distinct charges. If you would evade the consequences of your ill-doing in the past you will not withhold the desired information. Otherwise the punishment you so richly merit shall overtake you. I, your nephew, assure you of this."

"If I were to be torn in pieces by wild horses as the penalty of remaining silent upon this point I would not speak!" said Jane Macfarren, her eyes still fastened upon Herbert Lyon, who regarded her steadily in turn.

"How old was the boy when he ran away from the people with whom you had placed him?" asked Herbert Lyon, quietly.

"That is for you as a detective to discover," she retorted, with a bitter laugh. "Find Frederick Shirley, if you can. I challenge you to find him! I defy you to do so!"

Her voice rose to an exultant scream as she spoke. Mrs. Shirley turned away, sick at heart.

"I shall never find him!" she moaned.

"But I will!" exclaimed Edward Mortimer, solemnly, standing there in the centre of the room. "It is the only atonement I can make for the deception so long practised upon you, and in which I, unconsciously, participated. I will make it the one aim and purpose of my life to find your son, providing he still lives, and to restore him to you and the position I have so long usurped."

"No need to do that," said a voice, rendered less firm than usual by deep emotion. "He *is here!*"

Mrs. Shirley and Edward Mortimer gazed in all astonishment at the speaker. Jane Macfarren sprang to her feet, her face livid with passion.

"Then you know all!" she exclaimed, in a tone of fierce disappointment and baffled malice. "It is a plot, a conspiracy, got up between you! Frederick Shirley, I wish that I had killed you in your infancy ere you lived to grow up and defeat each cherished scheme of revenge, as you have done to-day!"

"What does it mean?" faltered Mrs. Shirley, approaching the young detective. "You, my son! Oh, merciful Heaven! can it indeed be true?"

"You have it upon her own admission," he replied, his dark, handsome face aglow with intense feeling. "I am the lad who, by reason of the ill-treatment he received, ran away at the age of twelve to commence life on his own account. When I met this woman in the City three days ago," pointing to Jane Macfarren, "her features seemed strangely familiar to me, yet I could not then recall where

and when I had met her before. Mr. Mortimer's statement, made a few hours since, his allusion to Frederick Shirley's early days, described to him by Jane Macfarren as having been passed amidst strangers in London, reminded me of my own wretched boyhood. By a lightning flash of memory I identified her with a woman who came once to the miserable place where I dwelt for the purpose of seeing my guardians. Allowing for the difference in age, I recognise her again now. I remember how, ere going away, her iron hand struck me some heavy, purposeless blows out of sheer spite; how she bared my arm to inspect two letters tattooed upon it in Indian ink. I saw her no more until we met in the City the other day. Mr. Mortimer's story first led me to connect these facts with your family history—to entertain the idea that I might prove to be your missing son."

"And those letters on your arm?" cried Mrs. Shirley, eagerly.

"There are two—"F. S.," probably placed there by Mrs. Macfarren, who can surely afford to be a little more explicit now."

"They were my work," said the person appealed to, sullenly, "for the purpose of recognising you in after years, should I desire to do so. When you entered this room I thought you were unaware of your own identity, and I was not likely to inform you of it. You are Frederick Shirley. Herbert Lyon is merely the name I bestowed upon you in lieu of your right one. I recognised you by your strong likeness to your father, Frank Shirley, as soon as you came in."

"My son, my son," cried Mrs. Shirley, her tears flowing thick and fast. "Then that likeness, which I too had observed, was not accidental. Heaven has been merciful, very merciful, in restoring you to me again—after many days!"

Deeply agitated, Fred Shirley clasped his mother in his arms. Edward Mortimer turned away from that sacred meeting, and walked towards the window. Jane Macfarren stood there regarding the mother and son with a fierce sense of defeat and foiled malice. It was through her agency they had met again, she who had done her utmost to sever them. What heavier punishment could possibly have been meted out to her than this?

"Frederick, you and Edward Mortimer will, I hope, become firm friends," said Mrs. Shirley, as she recovered her wonted composure; and the two young men clasped hands without a trace of ill-feeling or resentment.

Each felt that circumstances alone were responsible for their reversed positions and strange recent adventures.

Ere they quitted the house Jane Macfarren was constrained to sign a written admission of her guilt, respecting both the abduction and the forgery.

She further agreed to make over a sum of fifteen thousand pounds to Edward Mortimer, being part of the intercepted legacy, in consequence of which surrender he consented to forego a prosecution. Mrs. Shirley pardoned her on the condition that she left England never to return again.

The surprise in store for Amy Winsome was great. She did not resent the real Fred Shirley's advent, however, or regret it, since Mrs. Shirley had expressed her willingness to sanction the engagement between Amy and Edward Mortimer, and Amy was too happy, too unselfish, to regret her lover's changed position.

Their business in town settled at length, and Jane Macfarren finally disposed of, Fred Shirley, his mother, Amy, and Edward Mortimer, returned to Shirley Hall, where Dora, little dreaming what important events had transpired within the last few days, awaited their arrival.

Before leaving town, Edward Mortimer went again to St. Wilfred's-lane, hoping to see Pearl Desmond. He felt how much he was indebted to her; he deeply regretted the suffering he had caused her.

But Pearl was not there. She had gone into the country for a change, her father said, and Mortimer never met her again.

Old John's manner was stern and unfriendly. He refused to accept any remuneration for the hospitality extended to the young man, and Edward Mortimer came away, having failed to effect a reconciliation with him.

Pearl never married. She kept her father's house until he died, then entered a large London hospital, and went through the usual course of training in order to become a nurse.

A brave, capable, large-hearted woman with deep sympathy for the sick and suffering, she goes on her way through life cheerfully, uncomplainingly, yet with the image of the only man she ever loved still engraven upon her heart, and only death can efface it.

At Herbert Lyon, or rather Fred Shirley's, request, Dora was kept in ignorance of his identity until he reached Shirley Hall.

She had not expected the detective to return with the others, and his arrival sent the warm blood rushing to her fair face.

"Mr. Lyon," she said, timidly, extending her hand.

"No, not Mr. Lyon, Dora, but Fred Shirley, my own dear, long-lost son," said Mrs. Shirley, with a smile.

And Dora, upon being made aware of the strange combination of circumstances that had placed both Mortimer and Fred Shirley in their rightful positions at last, disgraced herself for the first time by fainting.

Upon her recovery, the others stole away, leaving her with Fred Shirley. The two young people soon arrived at a perfect understanding with each other.

"We shall have a double wedding soon," said Mrs. Shirley, with a smile, as she kissed and welcomed her daughter-in-law elect, glancing towards the other pair, seated apart in a deep window recess, absorbed in their own affairs.

Her prophecy came true. If you want to know how that ever-to-be-remembered wedding-day passed off, you must run down to Barminster, and the Barminster people will tell you all about it.

[THE END.]

FACETIÆ.

MEN who are glad to have a deaf ear turned to them—Aurists.

SOME men are so lacking in hospitality that they will not even entertain an idea.

AN artist once painted the picture of a gun so naturally that it went off—the sheriff took it.

"You need better air," said the doctor to a poor but proud invalid lady of maiden age. "Ah, doctor, then please send me around some millionaire."

"I SAY, Jenkins, can you tell a young tender chicken from an old tough one?" "Of course I can." "Well, how?" "By the teeth." "Chickens have no teeth." "No, but I have."

WAGGONER: "Mrs. Pancake complains that the last ton of coal you sent her seems to be very light." Coal Merchant: "All right. Just shovel some slate into the next load; she'll find that heavy enough."

A LITTLE boy was asked by his uncle if he wanted some flowers, and replied: "I don't care if I do." The uncle said: "I never give flowers to boys who 'don't care.'" Whereupon the urchin responded: "I don't care if I do; but I do care if I don't."

HOUSEMAID: "It does my heart good to see you and the baby together. It's a pretty picture. Sure, an' he's the image of you." Fond Mother: "But they all say that he looks like his father, Mary." Housemaid: "Bless your soul, mum, he's not good-looking enough for that!"

DUMLEY (to Brown): "Brown, I understand that Robinson referred to me yesterday as an old fool. I don't think that sort of thing is right." Brown: "Why, of course it ain't right, Dumley. You can't be more than forty at the outside."

EARNEST CHRISTIAN: "Does your husband go to church regularly, Mrs. Sprig?" "Yes, sir; he goes every day." "Every day! You mean every Sunday, don't you?" "No; I mean every day. He's slating the roof of the Methodist church."

A YOUNG man asked the lady of his affections the other evening how she liked the look of his new style of standing collar. After critically surveying him and the collar, she replied: "Very nice, indeed. It looks like a whitewashed fence around a lunatic asylum."

PHOTOGRAPHER: "Now try to look as pleasant as you can. Think about your best girl." Victim: "I wish you hadn't mentioned that subject. My girl jilted me last week." Photographer (equal to the emergency): "Well, think about some other fellow's girl."

"You say you aren't getting along very well in your courtship, Bromley. What's the trouble? A cross dog?" "No." "An irate father?" "No." "A younger brother who hides behind the sofa?" "No, Daringer. It's an older sister, who hasn't sense enough to retire."

"THE times are hard," said Z. "I have given up literary pursuits for the present." "And what are you doing now?" "I have gone into business." "Indeed!" "Yes, I have turned furniture dealer." "And do you sell much?" "I should think so; I've sold all my own!"

THE minister's little daughter was heard, Sunday morning, singing a love ditty about "going home with Nelly." Her mother asked her if she thought that was a proper song to sing on Sunday. "Why, how do you know," was the reply, "but he was going home with her from church, Sunday evening?"

AGENT (to woman, who has bought a Bible on instalments): "I've called, ma'am, for the monthly payment." Woman: "All right; I've got it tied up in a rag for you. I'll fetch it." "You are pleased with the book, of course, ma'am?" "Well, yes; I like the kiver, but neither me nor the old man are much pleased with the readin' matter."

"VIOLET," said the young man with hair evenly balanced and faultless attire, "I have come to-night to ask you a question that has been on my mind for weeks." "Well, Victor, what is it?" said the shy goddess. "I am anxious to know if you would take me for better or worse?" "Well, Victor, to look at you I should say worse." Victor is single yet.

A GENTLEMAN who was closely wrapped in a fur coat, surmounted by a cap to match, took a seat in a railway carriage by the side of a lady. He made several attempts to draw her into conversation, but without avail. At last he exclaimed: "Madam, why are you so ungracious? Do you take me for a wolf in sheep's clothing?" "No; quite the reverse," answered the lady.

FAIR DIVISION.—"My dear," said the aunt of a young widow to her niece one day, "is that your husband's portrait on the wall?" "Yes, auntie." "How blissfully happy, and what a heaven on earth must have been his life below," simpered the aunt. "Ah, yes," said the widow; "but we divided the thing up, so that when he became blissful in heaven I became happy on earth."

THEY are taking evidence in a divorce case. The husband is under examination. His wife, prostrated with grief, is weeping bitterly, covering her face with her handkerchief. "Now," says the counsel, "are you not ashamed to have thus brutally treated your wife—a tender young woman of twenty-five?" The wife suddenly raised her head. "I beg your pardon," she sobs, "twenty-four only." And she again gave way to her grief.

SOCIETY.

The Prince of Wales has presented a massive silver challenge cup to the Cromer Golf Club. The Prince is about to be presented by the followers of the Norfolk Hunt, of which His Royal Highness is master, with a model of a fox in silver.

The Emperor and Empress of Russia, with the other members of the Imperial family, were present at the ceremony of blessing the waters of the Neva, which was performed by the Metropolitan. After the religious rites had been performed, a State lunch was given at the Winter Palace. The Emperor subsequently distributed small tokens of gold to all those who were with him in the Imperial train at the time of the railway accident near Borki, in memory of their miraculous escape. The tokens represent a miniature copy of a sacred picture which was found quite undamaged after the accident in the dining saloon of the train. The Empress is expected to spend several months at Naples. She has been advised to do so for her health. The King of Denmark and the Duke of Cumberland are expected to pay her a visit there.

The beautiful house of Mr. Graham Tayler, Bankura, was the scene of great festivities on the occasion of the marriage of Miss A. Helen Beresford, daughter of the late Henry Beresford, B.C.S., and sister of Rev. Gilbert Beresford, with Mr. George Broadfoot Havelock, youngest son of General Sir Henry Havelock, K.C.B., of Lucknow, and only brother of Sir Henry Havelock-Allan, Bart., V.C., C.B. The bride was dressed in a white satin bodice and train over old point lace, with orange blossoms and tulle veil, and she carried a bouquet of white roses. A little page in gobelin-like plush, and two young bridesmaids in white silk, with long tulle veils and white chrysanthemums, followed her to the altar.

Colonel North and his party will probably be absent from England six months, during which time they will visit the colonel's properties in Chili, and will return *vid* San Francisco and New York, visiting Canada and all places of interest *en route* across the American Continent. Mrs. North remains in England to superintend the additions and refurnishing of the colonel's house at Eltham, in Kent.

Lord and Lady Henniker's silver wedding was celebrated at Thornham Hall recently. Amongst the numerous presents was a bracelet, given to Lady Henniker by the tenants' wives on Lord Henniker's estate, and a handsome silver gift from the members of the household. In the evening there was a ball at the Hall, the guests numbering over three hundred.

Mrs. Noble has given a brilliant ball at Park Place, Henley-on Thames. The floral decorations were exceptionally lovely; the Riviera contributed its choicest treasures of both fruits and flowers, for in the reception rooms bunches of oranges, olives, and citrons, with foliage fresh as though just gathered, hung in bunches from a background of white marble, falling amid a cascade of roses of every tint. white lilies, and here and there an orchid. The air was laden with the perfume of acacia and eucalyptus.

Other marble backgrounds displayed poinsettias and ferns. The corridors were arranged with orchids. On a table was a huge cushion of dark violets, with a ribbon of Neapolitan violets across, fringed with green leaves. A yellow plush basket was massed with mimosa and white lilac, tied with yellow ribbon. A small grotto on the stairs, with delicate ferns, was lighted by myriads of coloured lights. The supper was served at small tables and one long buffet in the billiard-room, and was exceptionally excellent.

STATISTICS.

The population of Germany, according to the last census, is 46,855,704.

The metropolitan characteristics of the inhabitants of the United States are noticeable id the following statistics:—In 1790 one-thirtieth of our population was found in cities; in 1800, one-twenty-fifth; in 1820, one-twentieth; in 1850, one-eighth; in 1860, one-sixth; in 1880, two-ninths.

The Growth of Berlin.—A Berlin newspaper recently published statistics showing the growth of that city during the last seventeen years. Removed as it is far from the sea-coast, and situated upon a river which is only such in name, the rapid development of the Prussian metropolis is one of the marvels of the age. From 1870 to 1887 Berlin almost doubled its population, adding 639,100 to its numbers, averaging 37,592 each year. During the same period the number of lots built upon grew to 6,187, or an annual increase of 364. In the year 1870 there were 56 persons to every lot upon which a house stood. In 1873 this had increased to 60, in 1879 to 61, in 1883 to 65, and in 1887 to 71. The density of the population is constantly increasing. The average rent of a dwelling in 1870 was 479 marks, which in 1887 had risen to 649 marks or about £32. Berlin has over 1,500,000 inhabitants at the present time.

GEMS.

A man of business is not always a business man.

Loyalty to best convictions is an important duty.

Health is too costly a blessing to be fooled away.

No blessing equals the possession of a stout heart.

Difficulties are overcome by diligence and assiduity.

Don't start business and fast living at the same time.

An optimist is an unreflective individual with nerves at concert pitch.

We find self-made men very often, but self-unmade ones a good deal oftener.

HOUSEHOLD TREASURES.

Gems.—For a dozen cakes, beat an egg until light, then add a pint of milk and half a teaspoonful of salt, stir into this slowly one pint of flour. Bake in hot gem-pans for twenty minutes. This makes a good breakfast.

Cheese, when cut for the table, very soon dries, and is left severely alone. This should be grated and put away in a wide-mouthed bottle that can be closely corked. It will be ready for the many uses which the skilful cook so well understands in the manufacture of custards, patties, omelets and many other dishes.

Orange Cake.—Two cups of sugar and half a cup of butter stirred to a cream; one cup of sweet milk, three eggs well beaten, three cups of flour, two teaspoonfuls of baking powder. For the frosting take the whites of two eggs; save out enough to frost the top; add to the rest the juice and grated rind of an orange, and spread between the layers.

Doughnuts.—One-and-a-half cups of sugar, one tablespoonful of butter, rub into the sugar, one cup of milk, one egg well beaten together, add as much flour as needed to roll out easily, one teaspoonful of cream tartar, one-half spoonful of soda, a little salt, and a small quantity of nutmeg. Have lard boiling hot, and stir frequently while cooking. Cut with round cutter, making a hole in the centre.

MISCELLANEOUS.

Style is only the frame to hold our thoughts. It is like the sash of a window—if heavy, it will obscure the light. The object is to have as little sash as will hold the light, that we may not think of the former, but have the latter.

An Arab's Courtship.—The Arab loves as none but an Arab can love; but he is also mightily excitable and easily won. An Arab sees a girl bearing water or brushwood, and, in a moment, almost in a glance, is as madly in love as if he had passed years of courtship. He thinks of nothing else, cares and dreams of nothing else but the girl he loves; and not unfrequently, if he is disappointed in his affection, he pines and dies. In order to commence his suit, he sends for a member of the girl's tribe who has access to the harem; and first ensuring his secrecy by a solemn oath, confesses his love, and entreats his confidante to arrange an interview. The confidante goes to the girl, gives her a flower or a blade of grass, and says, "Swear by Him who made this flower and us also that you will not reveal to anyone that which I am about to unfold to you." If the girl will not accept the proposal she will not take the oath; but, nevertheless, keeps the matter perfectly secret from all. If she is favourably disposed to the match, she answers, "'I swear by Him who made the flower you hold and us." Then the place and time of meeting are settled. These oaths are never broken, and it is not long before the ardent lover becomes the happy husband.

Stop in Time.—Even agreeable people can easily degenerate into bores. Tom Moore was a charming singer of his own songs, but no one could persuade him to sing more than two at one time. He was the pet of fashionable society, and would flit about of an evening from party to party, always importuned to sing, and always willing to gratify others in this way; but he had no idea of stepping over the line and allowing a single person to be annoyed. Two songs would be agreeable. Three or more might cause him to be voted a bore, and so he always resigned his seat at the piano when everyone wished him to remain. If other people and especially if politicians would act on the same principle? If the young man, who drops into a neighbour's once or twice a week and stays three hours, thus making himself a terror to a well ordered household, would only limit his calls to thirty minutes! One of these who extended his call well toward midnight, was quietly asked by his hostess if he would remain to breakfast? He was a sensible fellow and took the hint in good part, learning a lesson which always helped to make him a welcome guest.

The Myrtle Wreath.—In many parts of Germany it is still customary for the bridesmaids to bring the myrtle wreath, which they have subscribed together to purchase on the nuptial eve, to the house of the bride, and to remove it from her head at the close of the wedding-day. After this has been done, the bride is blindfolded, and the myrtle wreath being put into her hand, she tries to place it on the head of one of her bridesmaids as they dance aroud her; for, in accordance with an old belief, whoever she crowns is sure to be married within a year from that date. As may be imagined, this ceremony is the source of no small excitement, each bridesmaid being naturally anxious to follow the example of the bride. Referring once to the bridal wreath and chaplet it is still a current notion in many parts of Great Britian that the bride in removing these must take special care that her bridesmaids throw away every pin. Not only is it affirmed that misfortune will overtake the bride who retains even one pin used in her marriage toilet, but woe also to the bridesmaids if they keep any of them, as their prospects of marriage will thereby be materially lessened.

NOTICES TO CORRESPONDENTS.

C. S. V.—Lemons used in moderation are considered healthful.

G. L. M.—1. It has no particular meaning. 2. We are unable to judge. 3. Fair.

Anxious One.—We can recommend nothing better than the constant use of the tweezers.

F. S. L. S. Hopeful.—An answer will have been sent you before this notice reaches your eye.

H. J.—To get rid of superfluous flesh avoid articles of food that contain much starch or sugar.

E. E.—Either too little or excessive light is harmful to the eyes. No artificial light can be made equal to the light of day.

L. E.—Pimples may be prevented by not indulging in salt, rich, or greasy dishes. A cooling aperient taken now and then may also prove of service.

C. W. B.—Near-sightedness is sometimes natural, but it is often caused in children by bending over and bringing the eyes too close to the books or papers they read.

D. G. C.—Among the black sympathetic inks are the following: A solution of sugar of lead will turn black by moistening the paper with sulphide of potassium. If nitrate of silver is used, dip the paper into a solution of ammonia. Chloride of mercury will turn black when wet with chloride of tin.

Carla.—Your best plan is to take no notice of any of them. Treat them all with silent contempt, and they will soon weary of annoying you. Shakespeare tells us truly that if we are pure as ice or chaste as snow we shall not escape calumny. The only method therefore is to be silent and live it down.

Aline F.—A slight bow is all that etiquette requires after an introduction. Handshaking is optional, and it should always rest with the older person, or the superior in social standing, to make such an advance. An unmarried lady should not shake hands with every gentleman to whom she is introduced, or with whom she is acquainted.

Harry D.—1. The expression "There's a good time coming," is used by Sir Walter Scott in "Rob Roy." 2. The yellowish-brown colour of the Chinese nankins is the natural tint of the cotton, and is not imparted by dyeing. The name is derived from the city of Nankin, to which place the manufacture of these cotton stuffs was once peculiar.

Fred.—Your first duty on entering a public ball-room is to find your lady friend a seat, and then introduce to her your gentlemen acquaintances, who will solicit the pleasure of dancing with her, and whose names she will write down in her tablets, preparatory to the selection of her partners for each quadrille, polka, waltz, &c., in the order of dancing.

G. V.—We are not acquainted with any recipe for the manufacture of an ink suited to your purpose. Bank-note paper is made in such a manner at the present day that the washing out of the written signatures upon it can be very easily detected. The only way left open for you is to issue new certificates and cancel the first ones after they have been called in.

His Darling.—1. You are too young, in the first place, to know your own mind in such matters, and at least you should do nothing without the knowledge of your parents. If you carry on anything underhand or secret you will live to repent it heartily. 2. The receipt shall be given shortly. 3. We could not judge; the writing is good in style but very careless, for a girl of your age.

A. Peck.—The guardians, under the will in question, are evidently allowed a percentage of the income from the property of their ward or wards, and cannot expect to receive any other pecuniary reward unless the wards choose to make them a present. If you desire to show your appreciation of the gentleman's services, give him a pretty writing-desk, dressing-case, or any useful article that your means will allow.

M. F. O.—Masaniello is a contraction of Tommaso Aniello, the name of the Italian popular leader, who was assassinated in Naples, July 16, 1647. He was a fisherman. He was killed as a tyrant, but was subsequently revered by the people as a liberator. Auber's opera is founded upon his nine days' career. A tax on fruit and vegetables led to the uprising in which he was proclaimed "Captain-General of the Neapolitan people." He was buried with military honours. The insurgents were granted a general amnesty.

Bertha.—There are several lofty mountains in Germany, prominent among them being Feldberg, in the Black Forest, 4,675 feet above the sea; the Erz-Gebirge, or ore mountains, the principal peak of which is Schwarzwald, rising to a height of 4,500 feet; the Thuringian range, comprising the peaks of Beerberg and Schneckopf, each of which has a height of 3,300 feet; the Rhon-Gebirge, a mountain chain in Central Germany, in which are the traces of many extinct volcanoes; the Vogelberg, whose highest point is 2,430 feet above sea-level; the Hartz-Mountains, and the Westerwald, a seventy-mile chain of West Germany, forming the boundary between Westphalia and Nassau, the principal summit of which is 2,847 feet in elevation. In no case do any of the mountain ranges in that country exceed an elevation of 5,000 feet, and although they may be considered as a northern branch of the great Alpine system of Europe, bear no comparison with the Alps in point of height.

Flossie.—The length of the steamship *City of Berlin* is 488 feet.

D. E.—Harry is a nickname applied to persons bearing the name of Henry.

F. F.—It was Euclid that made the celebrated answer to Ptolemy, that there was no royal road to geometry.

R. N. S.—The number of slaves awaiting their freedom in Cuba, according to the last published statement, was 25,381.

H. M.—Concentrate your mind on everything you read, hear, or observe, and in the course of time the defective memory will be greatly improved.

J. J. S.—Yes. Chocolate is easy of adulteration, and it is often diluted with farinaceous substances, such as arrowroot, sago, or wheat flour, and with animal fats.

L. L. W.—To restore furniture, use three parts of linseed oil and one part of spirits of turpentine. Put on with a woollen cloth, and when dry, rub with woollen.

Janny.—There is nothing to prevent an actress from keeping her character unsullied, notwithstanding the many temptations besetting the footsteps of those following that profession.

Geoffery Damyn.—1. Join a good athletic club and practise gymnastics and drilling. 2. Try and be as amiable as you can. 3. You cannot change the shape of your features. 4. Moderate.

A. N. B.—It is thought that the word cash is derived from the Italian cassa, the chest in which Italian merchants kept their money. The application of "cash" to money is altogether English.

D. R. S.—Brass and iron are first mentioned in the Bible in the twenty-second verse of the fourth chapter of Genesis. Girl occurs but once in Holy Writ, and that in the third verse of the third chapter of Joel.

L. R. N.—Hair-bleaches and dyes are very injurious to the hair, on which account we cannot recommend any of them. The ingredients used in making them attack the roots of the hair, and in a very short time destroy them, causing falling out, premature baldness, and other disfigurement.

ST. VALENTINE'S DAY.

The little birds, awaking
Amongst the ivy-leaves,
Their nests are making, making,
Along the cosy eaves;
And, in the tangled grasses,
New buds and bells are born—
Meet gifts for lasses, lasses,
From true love's hands this morn.

True love, whose sweet beguiling
St. Valentine allows—
Oh, maidens, smiling, smiling,
O'er lovers' gifts and vows,
May true love fail ye never;
For, where its spell is flung,
The heart for ever, ever,
Is strong and glad and young.

H. M. B.

D. C. D.—The term "worsted" is said to have derived its origin from a village of that name in Norfolk, where the manufacture of such fabrics was first begun in 1340. At one time Norwich enjoyed a monopoly of the trade in worsted goods, but at the present date Bradford, in Yorkshire, is the principal seat of the worsted yarn and stuff manufactures of England, and is the great mart for long wools. Stockings made of worsted were at first only used by the common people, and Shakespeare uses the phrase "worsted-stocking knave" as a term of contempt.

C. W. A.—Charles Dickens' father, John Dickens, was for many years in the English Navy Pay Department, and after his retirement, became a Parliamentary reporter, in which pursuit his son was distinguished for rare ability. The first evidence of his literary abilities was given in the lively essays entitled "Sketches by Boz," published in 1836. The pen-name "Boz," selected by him, was the nickname of a pet brother dubbed "Moses," in honour of Moses Primrose, in the "Vicar of Wakefield." Sometimes the children pronounced it "Bozes," and gradually it became curtailed to "Boz."

W. J. S.—In olden times the human fingers were known as the thumb; toucher, foreman or pointer; longman, or long finger; lich-man, or ring finger; little-man, or little finger. The Romans believed that a nerve ran through the ring finger to the heart. Both they and the Greeks called it the "medical finger" and used it for stirring medicinal and other mixtures, firm in the belief that nothing harmful could touch it without dispatching a warning to the heart. In many parts of England at the present day the notion still exists that salve must not be applied to the flesh, or the skin scratched, with any but the ring finger.

R. S. T.—In some instances the firing of a cannon near the spot where the body of a drowned person is supposed to be lying at the bottom has caused it to rise to the surface; in others it has failed. It is supposed that bodies that are liable to rise upon the firing of cannon are almost on an equal balance upon the bottom, and the intense vibration of the air and consequently of the water tends to slightly distend such parts of the entrails as may contain gases under slight pressure. In this way the slightest distension of the gas confined in the body would overcome the difference in gravity between it and the water, and cause the corpse to come to the surface.

C. T. H.—"Jury-mast" is a corruption of "joury" mast. When a mast is carried away, a spar is set up as a temporary mast, or a mast for the day, the first word being derived from the French jour, a day.

D. R. A.—Give up any foolish notions of going on the stage, and turn to more substantial things. Use your voice in entertaining friends, but do not imagine that because they shower praises on you, the general public is hankering after an exhibition of those vocal powers. This is a most erroneous idea that should be got rid of as soon as possible.

C. J.—In the division of the personal estate of a person dying without a will, the uncle and nephew of the deceased would take their share, as settled by the courts, before cousins, provided the sisters, brothers, father and mother of said deceased were not living, as in the case quoted. Cousins are not considered in the direct line of succession in the division of estates, unless specially provided for by will.

L. T. L.—Judged by the description of your trouble, it is caused by a disordered liver, and no remedy can be suggested but a course of physic under the direction of a first-class practitioner, and an indulgence in exercise and plain, wholesome food. Get that important organ to work with the regularity and precision so necessary to a healthy state of the body, and the freckle-like blotches and reddish nose will in all probability disappear.

G. H. W.—In respect to the manner of teaching, the modern drift is towards education by the senses, rather than, as of old, through the intellect solely. We have come to see that boys and girls learn faster, more easily, more fruitfully, by being taught by the eye and hand, than if made to acquire all knowledge "through the spectacles of books." This conception is a return to nature in the best sense, and has many indirect advantages. It makes learning a delight; it implies physical training as the instrument and correlative of intellectual culture, and it has fewer dangers to health than the more ancient methods.

George.—Lamech, a descendant of Cain, first spoken of in the eighteenth verse of the fourth chapter of Genesis, was the first polygamist of which any record can be found. The names of his wives were Adah and Zillah. His sons were Jabal, the father of "such as dwell in tents, and of such as have cattle;" Jubal, the father of "all such as handle the harp and organ;" and Tubal-cain, an "instructor of every artificer in brass and iron." The sister of these male children was called Naamah. Lamech was also the name of one of the sons of Methusaleh, and became the father of Noah. He is supposed to have died about five years before the flood.

L. L. G.—The essential requirements of a fireproof safe are: The generation of steam in the filling, or more properly the safe-lining, for nothing burns within a safe when a filling gives off steam at 212 degrees Fah.; to continue this generation of steam the longest possible time, in order to save the contents of the safe during a protracted exposure to high degrees of heat: the maintenance of such properties within the safe as will generate steam when called upon; and the prevention of mould or dampness within the safe, or of oxidation to the iron frame of the exterior. Various substances are used as filling, such as soap-stone, alum and plaster, copperas and gypsum, paper-pulp and alum, tiles, alum and clay, asbestos mixed with gypsum and alum, raw cotton, saw-dust and whiting, or hydraulic cement. The thickness of this filling is not less than six inches, and the hinges, locks and flanges are so contrived as to conduct the least possible amount of heat to the interior.

Leonie.—According to the newspaper usage of the word a "Bohemian" is a happy-go-lucky mortal, who lives by his wits; who, when he has money, spends it freely, and enjoys it according to his own ideas of pleasure, which are generally sensuous and questionable, and who, when he has no money, makes the best he can of life, philosophises and doesn't fret. The Bohemian is unconventional, quick in his estimates, worldly in many matters, but unworldly in matters of finance. He lives beyond the edges of "society," and glories in his social freedom. The explanation of the origin of the term is this: In early times writers, artists, men of letters, actors and persons living mainly by their wits generally collected in colonies in the larger cities, and lived from hand to mouth. They were of irregular, gipsy-like habits, continually changing their quarters, and had so many points of resemblance to the traditional Bohemian gypsies that they came to be called "Bohemians." The term was at first applied half-derisively and half-poetically, but it was considered so appropriate that it became incorporated into several languages, and has survived.

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London: Published for the Proprietor, at 334, Strand, by J. R. Speck; and Printed by Woodfall and Kinder, 70 to 76, Long Acre, W.C.